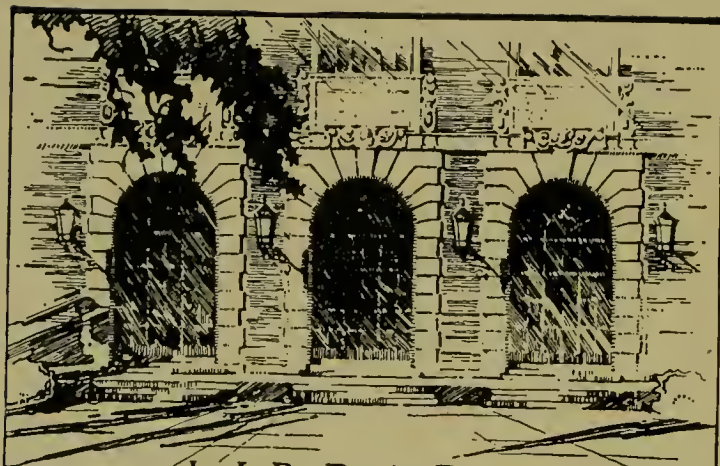


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THE BEAST



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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

A Fable

BY SARAH TYTLER

AUTHOR OF 'THE BRIDE'S PASS,' 'WHAT SHE CAME THROUGH,'
'SAINT MUNGO'S CITY.' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. I.

London
CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1884

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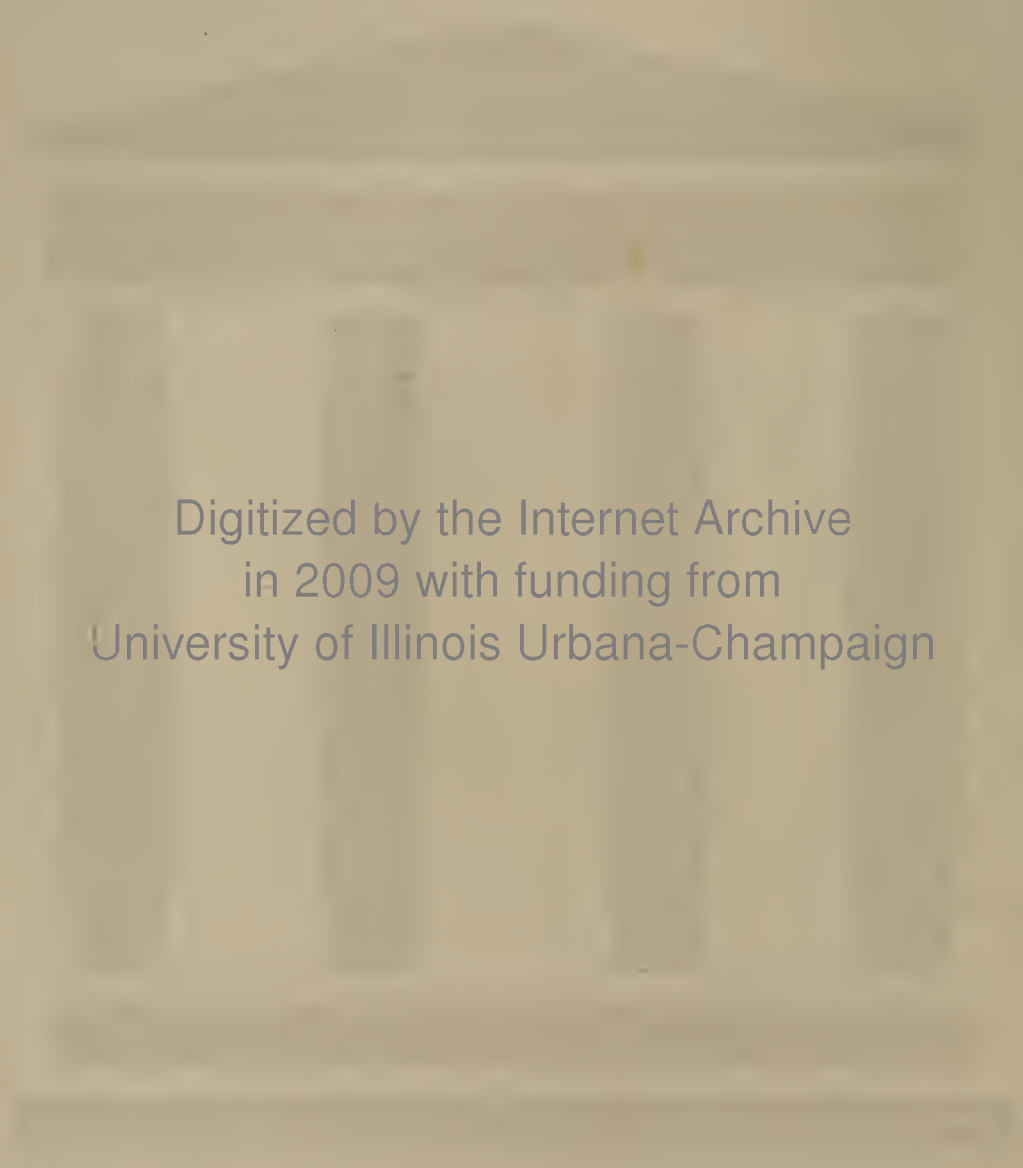
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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

CHAPTER I.

THE BEAST.

THE white glare of an Indian sun was beginning to beat on the parade-ground at Nhilpoor. The English regiment, which had been summoned for early drill, was detained to witness a painful piece of discipline, which the authorities trusted would prove a salutary warning. A young soldier named Thwaite, a fine, manly fellow in spite of his faults, had, in the course of several years' service, risen to the rank of sergeant. This desirable result was the effect of energy, daring, an obliging temper when he was not crossed, and a clever aptitude for a soldier's duties, born of mother-wit, sharpened by a rather better education

than was usual in his grade. Unfortunately his merits were counterbalanced by defects, which not even the promotion he had attained, calculated as it was to open his eyes to the side on which his bread was buttered, had been able to check. He was as rash and reckless as he was dauntless and enduring. He had an uncertain temper, spoilt by what was understood to have been a hard youth. He was careless of the company he kept, and careless of the excesses into which he fell in bad company. He had an elder sister, married to a cousin of the same name in the troop, but in spite of her efforts, and notwithstanding the staid example of her husband, who was a pattern of prudence, though he had not the wit to rise in the world, young Will Thwaite had been going from bad to worse lately, and had indulged in one fit of dissipation after another. They were beyond being hidden; they could not escape punishment; and both offence and punishment were totally incompatible with his position as a noncommissioned officer.

His best friends had grown weary of pleading for grace, which was so often abused. A court-martial could only come to one conclusion, especially as the Colonel of the regiment

was somewhat of a martinet, and had never entertained any great favour for Will. The commanding officer resolved the sergeant should be made an example of.

It was in anticipation of the spectacle that a certain solemn stir went through the mechanically controlled body, drawn out in strict order. The culprit was brought forth to confront the Colonel, who proceeded to see the sentence carried into effect, without any symptom of dislike to the duty. William Thwaite was reduced to the ranks, and in sign of the degradation the signal was given for the usual official to remove, in the presence of the man's comrades and subordinates, the stripes on the arm of his jacket, which were the token of his grade.

Till then Will Thwaite had stood like a statue, though his face was sullen and lowering. But the moment he felt the offensive touch on his arm he sprang aside, and before anyone could anticipate the action, tore the stripes from his coat by one wrench, and flung them right in the face of the Colonel, with a savage shout:

‘Take that from a better man than yourself!’

Blank consternation was the first result of the lawless defiance. The deed was such a gross breach of military discipline, such an unseemly violation of authority, that the poor Colonel gasped, and could hardly believe his senses, while the junior officers and soldiers gaped in harmony with their senior's gasp; and for an instant every energy was paralyzed.

Thwaite did not take any advantage of the second's pause to attempt a flight, which would have been as mad as what had gone before it. He stood at ease with the angry grin still on his face, till the whole company recovered themselves. He was put under arrest a second time, without offering any resistance, and marched back to durance, while the dismissed soldiers formed into groups and discussed the event of the day, filling the barrack-yard with subdued commotion.

The orator who spoke beneath his breath with greatest horror of the outrage which had been committed, and wagged his head with most reprobation and foreboding, was Lawrie Thwaite, Will's cousin and brother-in-law. It was not Lawrie who, as might have been expected, carried to his poor wife, said to be devoted to her brother, the news of his fresh,

unpardonable outbreak, and the imminent danger in which he stood of something to begin with still worse than being drummed out of the regiment. A gabbling straggler sought out Jenny, and, without preparation, divulged to her the miserable incident.

Jenny wrung her hands, prematurely withered and drawn by much washing to the troop. Well might she lament and cower in apprehension. The next court-martial weighed out the terrible, but warrantable, almost compulsory retribution, that Will Thwaite should undergo a certain number of lashes before being dismissed from the service.

CHAPTER II.

JENNY'S STRUGGLES.

JENNY THWAITE, a hard-featured, hard-working middle-aged woman, was more attached to her brother than to her husband. Indeed, it was alleged that she had married Lawrie Thwaite principally that she might have a chance of following Will to India and being still near him. The reason for this perversion of natural regard might exist in the fact that while poor Will, smart as he was, had sore need of such protection as she could afford him, there was no question that Lawrie Thwaite was quite capable of taking care of himself. In addition, Jenny had never borne a child, which might have broken the old allegiance, while Will had all along been like her child, seeing that he was nearly fifteen years her junior. She had looked after him in these old hard days of his youth ; she

had toiled to procure for him an education that might be more in keeping with his future than with his present fortunes ; she had suffered the keen disappointment of seeing him grow up wild and unsteady, until he forsook the trade to which he had been apprenticed—only stopping short of breaking his indentures and leaving Jenny to pay the forfeit—and enlisted into an infantry regiment under marching orders for India. Then Jenny consented to marry her cousin, who was in the same regiment, while he stoutly denied ever having decoyed Will into the service.

Lawrie was more Jenny's contemporary than Will's, and having been on the look-out for a careful, managing wife, who might wash, or do dressmaking, or perhaps keep the girls'-school, and so greatly multiply his resources, he had hovered about Jenny Thwaite with matrimonial intentions for years.

Jenny had not been a weak woman so as to remain blind to her boy's delinquencies ; had rated and reproached him, and sometimes was not on speaking terms with him for days ; but it was all for his good. She loved him faithfully through his worst scrapes, and was secretly serving him, even while she was

submitting to be shunned by him ; nay, taking the initiative in declining for a brief space to hold intercourse with him. She was the first to hail a sign of amendment ; she was extravagantly proud of his promotion, insisting that he would never stop till he got a commission, which would be no more than his due, though she must give up her washing, and it would be as well that Lawrie had served his time before that day came round.

The process of retrogression, even when it reached its extremity, did not shake Jenny's fidelity ; instead, it knit her so closely to her brother that she ceased to protest against his folly. Was it a time to be picking out holes in his coat and pointing to his errors, when the poor lad was in trouble and brought to so sorry a pass that he needed every grain of love to fight for him, cleave to him, and, if it were yet possible, save him ?

Jenny would leave Lawrie to play the cautious, cold-hearted, judicial part—to draw back in case of incurring reflected blame, to stand aloof, though with a decent show of reluctance to join in the chorus of blame. Neither did Jenny greatly censure her husband for his conduct. It belonged to the poor

man's nature, as she had known when she married him; and so long as he did not propose to stop her in the most desperate exertions she might undertake on her brother's behalf, according to the original bargain between the pair, honest Jenny could not see that she had any title to sit upon her husband.

It might have been otherwise if Jenny's conviction of her husband's fulfilling his bargain had been shaken, or if she had guessed that the great secret of her independence lay in the meanness, rather than in the phlegmatic magnanimity of the man she had married, that he dreaded to offend her high spirit mortally, lest he should lose the constant harvest of her skilled work which found many channels of outlet. Jenny never dreamt of a separate purse, neither would the scapegrace Will have consented to touch a farthing of her wages, so long as he could work for his own hand.

Jenny moved heaven and earth to deliver her brother from the barbarous infliction of the lash. She knew well that it would be the death of his moral nature, the brand that would enter his soul, even if his high-strung physical system recovered from the shock it

would receive. If it had been possible to administer the punishment vicariously, without Will's knowledge, she could have been wrought up to bare her brave shoulders like the Russian women to the knout, and like another Godiva have faced ignominy, so that the victim, who was her own flesh and blood, her darling since her early girlhood, might be permitted to go free. That resource was impossible. All that Jenny could do, and she had only a few days to do it in, was to wander day and night, praying for a commutation of the sentence. She appealed here and urged there. She worked upon the chaplain to draw up a petition for her. She vexed the souls of men with her sometimes speechless, but never-failing importunity, and the dry-tongued anguish of her despair. She declined to be repulsed, though she had been rather a proud little woman in her better days. She won over gentle, illogical, enthusiastic ladies to espouse her cause, and to plague their husbands never to mind precedents, not even justice, but for dear mercy's sake to grant Jenny Thwaite's prayer. She was the most careful washer and clear-starcher, the best darning, the nicest sewer of plain seam, the

most trustworthy nurse on a pinch they had ever found. The whole men would fare the worse, and every officer's household be in straits, if they drove Jenny beside herself. Why, the poor woman must go mad; she would die on their hands, and they would have two ruined lives, two deaths at their door. Was that what their stupid, stubborn bondage to form wanted? Colonel Bell was not a bit the worse of the insult. He had not so much as a scratch on the face; and was a poor fellow to be treated like a brute, because, for once in his life, he had forgotten himself, and behaved like a baby? Did not Bertie or Charlie throw his toys at anyone who came in his way—at papa himself, when the child was in a rage? Don't speak to the ladies of the demoralizing effect on the other soldiers, the loss of prestige where the rule of the officers was concerned, of mutiny, and insurrection, and chaos come again. No such horrors ensued in the nursery from making as little as possible of Bertie or Charlie's naughtiness, and leaving the child to come to himself.

Jenny wound up her vehement representations by what sounded in the circumstances

like wild romances, of the Thwaites having grand connections, with the likelihood that the family would rise in the world some day, when certainly the officers would be sorry for the cruel, base punishment they had inflicted. These unreasonable and passionate statements on the whole did harm to the woman's suit. Nobody had time to ask or give confirmatory details of the improbable story, which appeared to rest on no foundation, unless it were a little vapouring of Will in his cups, and some wary conceited bragging on the part of his brother-in-law. It was either a credulous delusion or a pure invention. It actually impaired the respectability of the pleader.

In the meantime, Jenny had no encouragement from those most interested in the affair.

'It is of no use, Jenny,' said her husband with ostentatious dismalness, doing little to second her in her frantic exertions.

'Never mind, Jen,' said poor Will, when she visited him. 'It will soon be over,' turning away to hide a shuddering recoil. 'Everything will soon be over, and you'll be well rid of a rascal who has only been a trial and grief to you.'

CHAPTER III.

THE RESCUE AND THE SACRIFICE.

JENNY'S fond, piteous struggles proved in vain. Law and order were inflexible. The offence was too outrageous. The welfare of the British army was at stake. Will Thwaite was to be flogged, though many a kind heart resented the necessity, or waxed rueful under it.

The morning of the flogging rose as sultry as the day on which Will had grossly insulted his commanding officer in the discharge of his duty. Will never forgot the airless heat of his cell as he lay on his face and awaited the summons to public shame and torture; compared to the last the sharp shock and sting of a pistol-bullet, and the smart of a cut from a sabre, of which he bore the scars, could have been as nothing.

Jenny did not lie on her face idle, though

her door was shut, and it was in shrouding darkness that she busied herself with a dumb intensity of preparation, in gathering together fomentations, unguents, rags, and bandages, and in filling a disused kit with wearing apparel and provisions for a journey.

But the post-runners came in before the hour for drill, and among the letters for the Colonel was one from a firm of London lawyers, which filled the scrupulous man with disturbance and dismay. There could be no mistake about it. He knew by name the respectable firm that applied to him, and their communication was carefully attested.

The laws of the service were as the laws of the Medes and Persians. Never had there been a more scandalous contempt of discipline than that shown by Will Thwaite on the parade-ground. But though the welfare of the British army ought to be the first consideration, there was also something—a great deal, according to Colonel Bell's ideas—to be said in support of aristocratic privileges and prejudices. Good heavens! a baronet and squire of many acres and long descent could not be flogged in the presence of a regiment of soldiers; some of whom represented his social

equals and future associates, while the rest were his undoubted inferiors. This was what the matter had come to.

The lawyer's letter to Colonel Bell contained the document which was to buy off William Thwaite, private in the regiment, on the grounds that he had succeeded to the rank and property of a grand-uncle, and was now Sir William Thwaite, of Whitehills, in Eastham, and it was not fit either for the rank and file of the army, or for the honourable fraternity of baronets and squires, that he should continue a day longer than was necessary a private soldier, even in the most select and distinguished regiment.

What would the firm think if the tidings were flashed to them that the baronet and squire was about to receive his deserts in the form of corporeal punishment?

No, it could not be ; the sentence, stringent as the obligation was, must be quashed—whether on the plea that the negotiation for Sir William's discharge had gone a certain length before he committed the offence, whether that Will Thwaite and Sir William, of Whitehills, were two different and distinct individuals, or from some other flaw in the indictment.

An informal council or court of astonished, scandalized officers was held, Colonel Bell assumed the responsibility with the War Office, and it was announced to a yet wider circle of open-eyed, open-mouthed, interested persons, that no flogging was to be performed. For William Thwaite, or more properly, Sir William Thwaite, had already ceased to belong to the service, therefore his misconduct had been dealt with under a false assumption. If he were still to be held accountable it must be before another tribunal.

The news found Sir William too stunned to take in its meaning beyond the two items that he was delivered at the eleventh hour from indelible obloquy, and that he was at liberty to depart from scenes which had become odious to him.

He staggered out into the blinding sunshine, doggedly enduring the measured explanations and shy, awkward congratulations of his recent superiors and judges, and impatiently shaking off the rougher and readier good wishes of his former allies. He went straight to his sister's without waiting for an invitation from Lawrie Thwaite, who, to be sure, looked more taken aback with the ex-

traordinary change in his brother-in-law's fortunes even than Colonel Bell had appeared. The Colonel, after the first shocked sense of incongruity and confusion, detestable to a man of his precise cast of mind, did not testify any vindictiveness or unwillingness to admit that the scales had undergone a sudden reversal in a comrade's case. But Lawrie shrank into himself, looked blue and green, and could hardly furbish up the thankfulness that was called for from him.

‘Did you ever see a chap hang his head as if his nose was bleeding, because his brother-in-law weren't walloped, and had come into a pot of money and a handle to his name? It ain't always not lost what a friend gets,’ remarked a shrewd observer.

‘Could this fellow have counted on any chance of his coming into the succession? He is a cousin of the other beggar's, and he might have calculated on this Will's never getting the better of the beastly consequences of his precious performance, drinking himself to death, or shooting himself. I have known a

an pull the trigger on less provocation,’ surmised a more thoughtful speculator on the event, which was the talk of the station for weeks

to come. 'Well, I for one am glad that the luck has fallen to the first. He has the thews and sinews of a man ; a clean-made, well-knit fellow, and would have been a first-rate soldier if he could have learnt self-control. I remember his dragging Roberts out of the enemy's range in the encounter in the Little Ghaut, when he first came out, and we had some brisk business doing. But he was always getting into a mess, and this last spurt of insolence threatened to put on the finishing-touch. He will go to the dogs as it is, taking a little longer time perhaps.'

Nobody save the two saw and heard the ecstasy of Jenny's recovery of her brother and recognition of his changed estate.

Nobody—Jenny included—doubted that Sir William would immediately start for England, where much business, the irksomeness of which would be splendidly gilded, must await him. The lawyers had sent ample funds for his travelling expenses, and there was nothing to detain him. Indeed, Sir William and his comrades had rubbed shoulders with such an extremely awkward *contretemps* that they felt mutually abashed and inclined to get rid of each other.

But a sorrowful, peremptory impediment sprang up on the eve of Will's starting. Jenny was worn by long years of work, and her constitution had not been improved by the climate of India. She was further spent by the burning anxiety and incredible exertions of the last few days, in the hottest of the hot season. She fell a ready victim to the fever hovering about the native town, and the disease from the commencement assumed a hopeless aspect.

There was no want of interest and sympathy. The mingled sensations which Sir William's story had excited relieved themselves in a crowd of attentions to the invalid. Jenny had many more shapes of jelly, bottles of wine, and preparations of iced milk sent to her than she could have possibly swallowed, though her short illness had been indefinitely prolonged. Her former employers waylaid Sir William and Lawrie Thwaite every time they stirred abroad, with inquiries, offers of service, even proposals to come and share the task of nursing the patient. These demonstrations proceeded quite as much from the romance of the situation, with the melancholy nature of poor Jenny's final part in Sir

William's good fortune, as from interested motives.

Lawrie Thwaite did not fail in attention to his wife, though he had never recovered from the combined shocks of his kinsman's dishonour and honour. He was a plain man, he said, and could not stand such flights of fortune. But he knew a good wife when he had her. He was persuaded—drawing the deduction from his own disposition, that it would be the last blow ; everything would be up with him if Jenny died, and not only deprived him of her services, but severed the near connection between him and Sir William. 'Drat Will Thwaite, that he should bear a title like an alderman or a dook.'

But Jenny, who had always been courageous and self-denying, was resigned to her fate and the will of God. She tried her best to meet and overcome the passionate rebellion of her brother. Her heart was still so full of gratitude and joy on his account that she had no room for sorrow herself. It appeared as if she had come to see that all was for the best, and could feel an unearthly satisfaction in this last offering up of herself for the lad.

'You won't want me any more, Will ; I

should only have been in your way,' she said faintly.

'Jen,' he protested in his vehement depths of love and sorrow, 'you know I would rather have lived in the most miserable den, and had nothing except potatoes and salt to keep me from starving, with you, than without you be master of the finest house in the kingdom, and have grand furniture and delicate dishes at my command. So don't go for to leave me, Jen—don't, if you ever cared a farthing for a scamp who was never worth the trouble you took for him, and the fondness you wasted on him.'

'No, no, my dear; I have my reward when I think of you as a gentleman among the best. I do know that it is sore for you to give me up, for we've come through the hards together, that we 'ave; but we've seen the last of poverty and knocking about, and it is all for the best. A pretty like figure I should have made as a baronite's sister! Why, Will'—raising herself up with difficulty, a smile on her wan face—'you'll get a fine young lady for your wife, as good as she is fine. You won't miss your sister Jen, though your kind heart will never let you forget her.'

‘I don’t want a fine young lady,’ said Will hoarsely. ‘What should I do with such cattle? They would only laugh at me and despise me. I only want you, Jen.’

‘Ah, lad, you don’t know what is good for you. Rest content ; there is One as knows, and He don’t make no mistakes, though it ain’t the thing we fancy we want He gives us mostly. But there is something you can do for me, lad, before I go—a single favour I’m bold to ax.’

‘Ax all I have, and you are welcome to it. Don’t put your request in that way,’ said Will reproachfully.

‘Nay, it is the fitting way, since you are the head of the house—Sir William, no less’—dwelling on the words in her weak voice with loving triumph. ‘If I am not the first to do you honour, who should be? But I ha’n’t too much breath to spare. Will, dear, it is the drink that has been your ruin; not that you’re ruined—far from it—and you ain’t a sot—God forbid!—but you’ve gone your own way, and not been too peticklar about the company you kep’—judging others as you did yourself, like a innocent ’igh-spirited chap—not always looking out for number one,

keeping out of mischief yourself, and leaving others to pay the piper, like poor Lawrie, and the drink has done the rest; when it was on you it has driven the wit clean out, and made your temper work like mad. Promise you will have no more to do with the drink, for it tempts gentle and simple, in one shape or another, as I've seen in some of the tip-top bungalows, where I've gone to do a day's washing. Your being Sir Wil'am and a squire will not keep you straight, but will only make your fall the greater, if you let the drink get the better of you. I'll not rest in my grave if that day come. Promise me, Will, you'll have done with the drink, and I'll die 'appy.'

'I swear I'll never put my lips to a glass from this day forth, if that will content you. It is the least I can do for you, that has done everything for me since mother left me a whining baby,' the young man vowed solemnly.

'And I can answer for your keeping your word—that's my good lad,' declared the dying woman, with growing feebleness and perfect satisfaction.

Will roused her afresh.

‘Is there anything more I can do for you, Jen?’ he implored—‘not for myself, but for yourself or any other person you mind about.’

‘Bless the lad! what should I desire now but to ’ave him sitting there, where my eyes can fall upon him, the last thing. Well, there is, Lawrie. I doubt poor Lawrie will miss me a bit,’ muttered Jenny, rather in a tone of benevolent consideration than of keen sympathy. ‘You might spare a trifle and settle summat on Lawrie. He’s your cousin, as well as my goodman—a poor relation of the family, such as you were wont to be when no helping-hand was held out to you; but it’s forget and forgive where I’m going. With that and his pension, when his time is out, he’ll fare well enough, without feeling the likes of me gone, and no more money coming in to eke out his pay.’

‘He may have the half of all I’m to get for your sake, Jen. I don’t feel to care about it,’ said the new squire in his despondency.

‘The half of your inheritance! Have you taken leave of your senses, lad?’ cried Jenny, almost springing back to life and energy at the extravagance of the proposal. ‘What would Lawrie Thwaite do with a gentleman’s

allowance ? You could never make a gentleman of him. He would only hoard it, and run the risk of being robbed and murdered, or be cheated out of it by some fair-tongued scoundrel, for Lawrie ain't wise, though I've heard him called a wiseacre. Between you and me he's greedy and cunning, poor soul ! but there ben't no great harm in him, and he ha'n't much of a head-piece. No, Will, I said a trifle out of your abundance ; stick to that, and I 'ont be displeased or troubled with the fear that I did wrong in marrying Lawrie to follow you, and so mebbe hung a millstone round your neck. We're but weak critters, and don't see an inch before our noses. For his sake as well as for yours, let it be no more than is in keeping with what he has been used to, and what he needs. It is another thing with you, who are to be a grand gentleman, a benefactor to your kind, like old General Leigh with his soldiers and the natives. You remember him and the monster funeral he had ? Ay, but I would have liked to see you at the height of your glory !' cried Jenny, beginning to wander. 'I would have liked to have seen Whitehills just once, and then crept down into the dark hole. Whitehills, with

its floors of gold and its gates of pearls, and you among your ivory and your apes and peacocks. But we'll meet again in a better place, Will—a better place, where there's no more parting.'

Jenny was dead and buried. There had been a most respectable attendance at her funeral. It seemed perfectly natural that her brother, Sir William, should act as chief mourner, paying his sister all the respect which she had so richly merited, in his first appearance in public after his accession to rank and fortune. The company were actually at the grave's mouth before an awkward omission was remarked. The widower had not joined the little cavalcade.

Will took himself severely to task because he had shut himself up with his sorrow and only come out when he was sommoned to walk at the head of the coffin. He went immediately on his return to seek his brother-in-law, and take the first steps in the arrangement which had been agreed upon between Will Thwaite and his sister. It was too late; the wretched man had hanged himself.

The catastrophe was classed as a singular instance of wedded love and despair in a man

who had not been demonstrative in his regard for his partner during her lifetime. Paradoxical, pensive spirits pointed to it as a case of repressed emotion and misunderstood devotion.

The sorry truth was that Laurence Thwaite had been goaded beyond the utmost stretch of his endurance by the cruel chapter of accidents, which had thwarted all his crafty plans and secret hopes. Why had events happened so promiscuously, and yet with such horrible fortuitousness for Will? Why had his prodigal course been stopped, before folly and the climate had sent him post-haste and betimes beyond the succession to a baronetcy and a squire's acres? Why had the indignity and anguish of the flogging been remitted? Why had old Sir John Thwaite, after he had lived beyond his three-score-and-twenty years, not hung out just another month, but insisted on dying in the very nick of time? Why had the post-runners not slackened their speed and delayed the mail, if but for one hour? And now the last misfortune had happened. Jenny, who was so clever a bread-winner and manager, had taken it upon her to die out of hand. There had been no love lost between

him and Will in the past. Will would seize the opportunity of Jenny's death and his departure to enter on his possessions, to get rid of Lawrie, as Lawrie, in similar circumstances, would have got rid of Will. Lawrie would be reduced to his poor pay, with the prospect of greater indigence in his old age, after he had been let down from a condition of comparative comfort, and shut out from the intoxicating prospect of a great inheritance.

It was more than the miserable man could bear. He counted himself hardly dealt with, both by God and man ; his brain reeled, and he flung up the game in a sudden fury, which altogether overcame his caution and deliberation.

As for Will, he was cut to the heart by what struck him as the ghastly result of his swift, selfish unfaithfulness to Jenny's trust ; though he could not pretend to regret, on any other grounds than those of horror and pity, his kinsman's fate. It sank into Will's spirit that no good had come, or would come, of his prosperity. It had saved his worthless credit and life, but it had cost Jenny her life, and it had driven Lawrie Thwaite to destruction.

CHAPTER IV.

WHITEHILLS.

THE Thwaites of Whitehills were one of the oldest families in Eastham, but, like many another old family, all its members had not preserved its dignity intact, or behaved with the decorum which ought to have accompanied blue blood. Two generations before, a foolish lad had alienated his kinsfolk by a low marriage with the daughter of one of the keepers. He had consummated his evil-doing in the eyes of the head of the house, by declining to come begging for pardon, and to submit to the authority which should mete out to him at once his punishment and such assistance as might enable him to make the best of his bad bargain and refrain from disgracing his family further. He was only too willing in his refractoriness to drink as he had

brewed ; but since such culprits are not often gifted with the strength of character and determination of mind which mark the successful architects of their own fortunes, the drink he consumed grew very thin indeed. He sank lower and lower in the social scale, and ended by becoming a considerable burden on his father-in-law, the keeper. He had, as a matter of course, been dismissed from White-hills ; but as he was a capable, industrious man, master of his calling, and had not been privy to his daughter's love and ambition, he succeeded without much difficulty in getting employment in another part of the county.

The matter, though a source of mortification and pain to the Thwaites of that day, was of less consequence, apart from family pride and affection, inasmuch as the delinquent was not the heir, and had more than one elder brother.

There was no lack of sons then at White-hills ; but time sometimes works havoc among the strongest of such stays. Time was rather slow in its work in this instance, and as a cousin who has descended in the social ranks is not like a brother fallen into low life, the successors of the erratic Thwaite

who was at the bottom of the mischief were still more left to their fate by their illustrious relatives.

The poor Thwaites, inheriting the good and evil of the paternal temper, had the rare grace not to obtrude themselves on the notice of their loftier kindred, though the plebeian branch kept up the recollection of their descent. One of them had even gone so far as to make, on one of his few holidays, at a considerable sacrifice, an *incognito* journey in third-class carriages and on the tramp, to gaze, from a respectful distance, with gloating, covetous eyes on what, in picturesque language, might be called the cradle of his race. He kept the expedition jealously concealed from people who had even a nearer interest in it. No doubt it added to the liveliness of the interest, that the news had filtered somehow to those most concerned of the gradual sweeping away of the elder branch of the stock. Deaths at home and abroad, old bachelors whose rights perished with them, childless couples equally without representatives, left the last Sir John, in the direct line, limited to his family and to the alien Thwaites for the preservation of the title and

land in connection with the original name. He had no power by the terms of the entail to will away the inheritance—even so far as heirs female, while there existed the remotest heirs male who could prove their descent and produce their registers.

In view of the exigency of the situation, Sir John seized the opportunity of marrying twice—first in early manhood and again late in life. A third opportunity was not vouchsafed to him. In the first instance, the children died in infancy. In the second, the sole child born was a boy, weak both in body and mind.

There seemed no resource for Sir John save to make himself acquainted with his poor relations, and cultivate them diligently while there was yet time to provide a decent wearer of his honours. But the old man was of an arrogant, narrow temper. He clung to the last, with as much passionate pride as human feeling, to the hope that his poor boy, with all the aid which his position could give him, would grow stronger and wiser as he grew older, and when that trust was stamped out by the death of the little fellow, the father would not consent to put a low bumpkin in his son's place. He

washed his hands of the whole matter, the error of his ancestor and the misfortune of an illiterate, underbred master of Whitehills. Sir John peevishly refused to do what he could to set the wrong right. If Providence had chosen it was to be so, why should he plague himself to concoct a partial remedy? On the contrary, he did his best to become enamoured of the Frenchwoman's motto, '*Après moi le déluge.*'

All that Sir John would attempt for the credit of the name and the good of the place was to live as long as he could and keep the interloper out till his last breath. This he contrived to do till he was an octogenarian with four or five years to spare.

The Thwaites with the puddle in their blue blood had not been longer lived or more productive of heirs than the main line had shown itself. At last the inferior branch resolved itself into Will and Jenny Thwaite, the son and daughter of the elder grandson of Dicky Thwaite, who fell from his station by marrying the keeper's daughter, and Lawrie Thwaite, the grandson of the younger son of the same worthy. There was no confusion of numbers or difficulty in tracing the proper descendant

from the man who formed the link to the baronetcy and estate. Perhaps the wonder was that no long-sighted individual had anticipated the end, and insisted on advancing money, or otherwise bettering the condition of the future Sir William. But Will and Jenny would have looked shyly on such overtures, and their going out to India put temptation more out of their reach.

Sir William had never seen Whitehills before the day that he drove down to it with his lawyer, one of the leading members of the well-reputed firm, a clever little gentleman-like man, who honestly wished to do his best by his strange client, but could not make much of him, as he watched him curiously at a crucial epoch of his history. Sir William was a personable enough young fellow of five or six-and-twenty. He was not above five feet eight inches in height ; but his sinewy figure was well developed. His carriage was good, though it partook a little of the ramrod ; but that defect was sometimes to be found in the bearing of field-m Marshals. Thanks to his soldiering, Sir William was delivered from the clumsy, loutish shuffle or slouch of a day-labourer or a mechanic, and from the

jerking gait or skip of a journeyman tradesman or counter-jumper. His close-cropped hair was chestnut; the florid colouring of his face had not yet lost the bronze of India and the tan of a sea voyage. It was a complexion which was not a bad match for that of a college undergraduate who went in for athletic sports, or of a country gentleman who had his year strictly divided into fishing, shooting, and hunting seasons.

In some respects the lad looked younger than his years, though he was of manly make. In others—in a slight massiveness peculiar to his features, and in what had become the inflexible gravity of his aspect, he gave one the idea of maturer age than he had attained. The best and the most striking things in his face consisted of two marked traits. The natural sweep of his hair made an ample corner on each side of his forehead, disclosing a full brow above, well-apart eyes and eyebrows, which lent an impression of honesty and frankness, as well as of intellectual capacity. His eyes were dark blue, and though they sparkled oftener than they melted, would have gone a long way to confer beauty on a woman's face. The worst points were incon-

gruous and contradictory in the inferences to be drawn from them. The jaw inclined to dogged squareness, while the chin was ill-defined and boded weakness.

Mr. Miles the lawyer, during the necessary detention of Sir William in town, had in the most delicate manner suggested an outfit in accordance with the change of rank. This and other considerate attentions had provoked no restiveness on the part of their object, such as might have been apprehended from a feather-headed fool suddenly raised to an elevation altogether beyond his level, with the etiquette of which he was necessarily unfamiliar. Sir William adopted a tweed morning-suit and a dinner-dress without making any difficulty. What he did in trifles was a happy sign of what he might accomplish in weightier matters. His mode of meeting the hints given him raised him in the opinion of the late Sir John's agents. But the instructions could not be more than hints, for with all his rusticity and simplicity, there was something about the heir which kept sensible, self-respecting men, gentlemen themselves, at a proper distance.

On the other hand, there was nothing about

Sir William which could force his prompters to look down upon him, while they should be under the necessity of taking the upper hand with him. The lawyers found their client had fair parts, and could understand what was explained to him, even though it had to do with business out of his accustomed rut. He had received a very tolerable education in the three great primitive R's and of one R he had availed himself pretty considerably, in what appeared, at first sight, untoward circumstances. He had a taste for reading, and in spite of his admitted wildness, had taken advantage of the regimental library.

Altogether, what with the gain of his foreign experience and military training—granted that the last was in the ranks—he might at least hold his own, on the score of ordinary intellectual knowledge, with those young English gentlemen who have no taste for the classics, have been plucked over and over again in their examinations, frequent stables and kennels instead of drawing-rooms, and never open a book except the *Field* or *Bell's Life*.

Messrs. Miles and Dickinson were rather proud of their client. They had dreaded

something very different ; now they augured quite hopefully of his future—a quiet fellow, not at all without common-sense, which was better than uncommon genius, who had done with sowing his wild oats, and pulled up effectually so far as anybody could judge. He might not make such a mess of the baronetcy and property as some very fine gentleman would have done. Manners, of course, he had none ; but no manners were a great improvement on bad manners. He had everything to learn there, but comparatively little to unlearn. He had his drop of good blood, which people would be particularly ready to recognise, seeing it was now fitly balanced by an old title and good landed property. The last, no agricultural depression, or vindictive policy of old Sir John in granting long leases at low rents, and pensioning dependents inordinately, could greatly impair. In those days, when landowners had a strong call to fall back into gentlemen farmers working their own land, against odds too, Sir William might not be amiss as a plain country gentleman. Let him marry well—

‘ A penniless lass with a long pedigree,’

and *savoir faire* to her finger-tips, and be amenable to his wife in those respects in which she was his superior, and there was no fear of him. He seemed a finish fellow in the main, both in physique and morals.

What puzzled and disconcerted Mr. Miles in his otherwise satisfactory charge, was the inflexible gravity and inscrutable reserve with which Sir William made acquaintance with his prospects, and at last with his place. It was surely unnatural, especially at his age, that he should express no rejoicing, hardly even satisfaction, at his accession. He had lost his sister very recently, but the death of an elderly married woman, though she had brought him up, was not likely to affect so deeply a young fellow with the ball at his foot.

Sir William and Mr. Miles were driving over from the nearest station in a trap which the lawyer had appointed to be ready for them. He had thought it better not to order the Whitehills carriage to meet them, with its announcement that the new master was come, and its proclamation of the news to everybody they might pass on the road. The wiser arrangement was for Sir William to arrive

without attracting particular attention. If a demonstration were demanded and found desirable, let it come later, when everybody should be better acquainted and prepared for what was to happen. When Sir William's wishes were asked on the subject, he emphatically acquiesced in Mr. Miles's judicious plan.

The day was in spring, during blustering, but not uncheery March weather. The landscape was as flat as most of the scenery of Eastham ; but it was not without its charms in the absence of picturesqueness. It was wide and free, even to its broad, rutted, shaggy green lanes, in which a gipsy encampment, or the evicted Shakers might pitch a tent or two, and still leave ample room for the small traffic, principally of carts or waggons and day-labourers passing that way. There was a certain rugged sincerity in the unpretending homeliness of the fields, together with a shade of sadness and sombreness oftener attributed to some descriptions of French, than to any examples of English landscape.

This suspicion of pathos had a complex origin. This corner of Eastham had never

been in the van of agricultural progress, and was as moderately productive as it was inadequately cultivated. It had plenty of well-preserved, carefully stocked coverts for game, and bore a hunting reputation; but the low value of the land in other respects was evident, not merely in the spaciousness and frequency of the lanes, but in the recurring wedges of ground covered with straggling, sodden grass and rushes.

The country here was very scantily populated. Anything like market towns or villages worthy of the name were separated by six or eight miles. In general, a village was represented by half-a-dozen thatched or tiled houses—not even clustering together, but standing with wide gaps, till the dwellings extended over a quarter of a mile—by solitary road-side inns, and road-side shops which partook of the character of Australian stores. As for the small, ancient, often beautiful churches, they seemed to exist principally in connection with their rectories, sometimes equally beautiful in their mellow, red-brick multiplicity of angles and luxuriant green draperies. The mansions of the nobility and gentry were largely conspicuous by their absence, and the

squires' seats had sunk into farmhouses, dating in more than one instance from pre-Elizabethan times, which would have delighted the antiquary or the archæologist. There was an arrested, isolated, half-clownish, poverty-stricken aspect about what was, in fact, one of the most primitive districts in England, though it had not been furnished with any barricade of hills or rivers.

The working people, consisting almost entirely of day-labourers, the moment they had passed their first youth, looked dull and apathetic, on rare occasions fierce and savage, as if heart and spirit had either been crushed out of them, or raised into sullen revolt by the grinding toil necessary to keep soul and body together. It was probable that William the Conqueror's Domesday Book attested the region—what with Norman castles, Saxon homesteads, and religious houses, squatters on waste territory, fishers of pike and tench and shooters of wild-fowl—more populous and fully as thriving as it was to-day.

So much for the sombreness of what was comparatively waste, half-inhabited and down-trodden in this section of Eastham ; but there was no gloom which a March wind and a

changeable March sky could not relieve and carry off. There was a flavour of liberty and a feeling of room to breathe in the uncrowded earth and the unvitiated, though somewhat moist and heavy air. The patches of blue in the sky were matched by the springing green corn, and the banks studded with primroses. There were more than primroses gemming the little watercourses and the long grass by the sides of the ditches ; there were such quantities of purple and white violets unseen by the travellers, that they lent a subtle sweetness to the scent of decaying leaves and freshly turned-over earth. Rooks were wheeling and cawing over the ploughing and the sowing in the fields. Small birds were stirring and chirping in the coverts, where the twigs of the underwood had swollen with the bourgeons and acquired the bluish-purple tint of the bloom on a plum. Colts, calves, and lambs were kicking up their heels and frisking in the meadows.

‘ That is Whitehills, Sir William. Let me congratulate myself on being the first to point out to you the home of your ancestors,’ said Mr. Miles, betrayed into tall language by the importance of the occasion, as the trap turned

the bend of the road which brought the mansion-house into view.

‘Just so. Thank you, sir,’ said Sir William, who had not got over the last form of address, and who spoke mechanically and almost as apathetically as any native. He did not even spring up to a standing position to catch a better glimpse of the house; what he did see of it, perhaps, was not calculated to strike him much, unless he were blinded by the sense of ownership. He was neither antiquary nor archæologist, and what he distinguished between the leafless branches of the trees of the park was only a long, low white building, with the remains of a moat in a gleaming pond—a common feature of all the old ‘halls’ in that part of Eastham. The house was not likely to impress his ignorant, underbred taste. He felt rather inclined to contrast the reality a little sadly and sardonically with his poor Jen’s delirious dreams—in which she confounded earth and heaven—of floors of gold and gates of pearls.

Mr. Miles had cleared his throat and began to talk of the origin of the name. There were no hills in Eastham, and hardly even one elevation here. Some people thought that

'hills' referred to remote cromlechs or mounds over illustrious dead, whether Danes or Normans, Saxons or Britons, and that the adjective 'white' meant either the unsullied purity of their patriotism, or the clear light of that land to which their souls had fled.

Old Sir John had pensioned his domestics so liberally, that they had retired in a body, for the most part, to enjoy the idleness and domesticity secured to their declining years. One or two, who had been more Lady Thwaite's servants than Sir John's, went to form the nucleus of a comfortable establishment for the well-jointured widow at the dowager-house of Netherton, four miles off. Mr. Miles had taken care that a new staff should be put in office, and had enlarged to his wife on the great gain of a discreet butler and a staid, efficient housekeeper. The first performance of these important minor actors in the drama was perfectly satisfactory, and did credit to Mrs. Miles's selection. They behaved with the silent, attentive civility which was all that was wanted from them. If they could practise imperturbability in addition to the quiet discharge of their duties, it might be as well; though Mr. Miles began

to hope more and more that Sir William would not from the beginning tax too severely the nerves of his domestics, or outrage their standards. No doubt a gentleman from the ranks might hold his tongue to his agent, and yet not preserve his distance from the inferiors with whom he would come in constant contact. For that matter, these would hardly have held him their social equal of old. But Mr. Miles was fain to anticipate better things from Sir William.

The heir had crossed the fine old hall, really a choice specimen of a low-roofed, but spacious, many-recessed entrance hall, where black and white marble had preceded tiles, and a great fireplace, sending forth a ruddy glow of light and heat, diffused a grateful warmth, that took out the sting implanted by the March winds, and offered a kind of physical welcome home.

From the equally balmy atmosphere of a corridor, rich in pictures, cabinets, and the superseded Lady Thwaite's fancy in flower-stands and low ottomans, Sir William had entered the library, with its entire lining of books, its classic busts, and faint perfume of generations of culture transmitted by the

medium of old Russia leather. It had been Sir John's study, though he was neither a scholar nor a student, and it had never struck him as out of keeping with its possessor. But it was here that the sense of the contrast between his past and present position seized upon Sir John's successor and staggered him.

It was easy enough to guess that the change might be too great to be pleasant, though none save Will Thwaite himself knew the whole story of that Nhilpoor, where he had lain on his face groaning, awaiting the brutal punishment of the lash. The scene rose up before him with sickening, revolting vividness. Just so it would arise and fill him with a kind of dire bewilderment and terror as of discovery, exposure, and the awakening from a mad beguiling dream, on many a future occasion, which would otherwise have been among the gladdest and brightest experiences of his life. Not the den at Nhilpoor alone, for that had not been the first instance of his lying under arrest in a dog-hole, neither had he been a martyr to military tyranny and his commanding officer's persecution. He had deserved all he had got and more. The

gulfs of low debauchery in which he had been sinking deeper and deeper, from which Jen had striven in vain to warn and snatch him, stood out as plainly written in letters of fire on his brain. From the moment he had bent over Jen's bed and known himself powerless to save her, his remorse for those grievous sins against her devotion, which had cost her life, smote him with throes of self-disgust, convulsing his nature and threatening to remain an indelible accusing record on his conscience, quickening any original sensitiveness, which had been hardening for years, and rendering it morbid for life. He could not agree with her that she would have cut but a poor figure wherewith to adorn his elevation in rank. If that were true, then perish the elevation, for he knew, if none else did, how far she was his superior. He had slain the creature who had done everything for him, and was so much better than he. It was over her grave that he had stepped to his promotion. He had even in his wretched self-engrossment neglected her last charge and suffered Lawrie to perish. If it were not for his pledge to Jen, he would not care what became of him when everybody was singing

out the mocking lie that he had been so lucky in coming into a fortune and all that rubbish. But for Jen's sake he must keep his word, and deny himself to the last the one antidote to his misery. He must die game and sober.

CHAPTER V.

NEIGHBOURS.

SIR WILLIAM had paused on the threshold of the library, and Mr. Miles, who was watching his companion, saw him get first red and then white, and hang his head. The next moment the master of the house walked to one of the windows, and, as if to mask any disturbance he had betrayed, asked, in the slow, measured speech which attaches to speakers who weigh every word they utter:

‘What is that house to the right? Who occupies it?’

‘There is only one house within sight, I think,’ said Mr. Miles, in the easy, unaffected tone he sought to establish between the two, joining the speaker as he spoke. ‘That is Lambford; it belongs to Lord Fermor. He is in his dotage, and Lady Fermor rules for him. She is your nearest neighbour. I am

sorry to say she cannot be called a good neighbour.'

Sir William's curiosity was easily satisfied.

Naturally it was not the first time that the lawyer had dined with his client. Mr. Miles had already found the opportunity of noting two things. One was that the young Baronet conducted himself very much according to ordinary rules. He had assisted as an orderly at mess dinners; he had come home first-class, and, being surrounded by an odour of good fortune, his presence had been welcomed instead of tabooed at the *table d'hôte*. He was too proud to subject himself to ridicule by failing to acquire habits which the practice of a little observation and self-restraint could quickly teach him. A smart soldier, clean and neat to finicalness, tutored to one species of etiquette, has always the making of a conventional gentleman in him, however far he may be from the higher type, and Will Thwaite, apart from his fits of dissipation, had been a very smart soldier.

The second peculiarity which had attracted Mr. Miles's attention was that Sir William drank nothing save water. Taken by surprise, the elder man was tempted to rally the

younger gently, for the former was already doubtful whether the latter were a fellow at whom his neighbours could safely poke fun. 'Are you a Good Templar? Have you taken the pledge?'

Sir William did not appear to see the joke. 'No, I am not, though there are some of the sort in India,' he said with his accustomed gravity; 'but I have taken a pledge, though it is not of the kind you mean.'

'All right,' answered Mr. Miles. 'Every man should judge for himself.' At the same time he was reflecting in his own mind, 'I wish you may keep it. Possibly these are the safest lines for you.'

So it was the butler, and not Mr. Miles, who received a shock from the man's master's decided waiving aside of his attentions with, 'I don't want any wine.'

'No wine, Sir William? I beg pardon, sir, but I think I must be mistaken. Do you mean neither sherry nor chablis, nor hock?—I have them all here with the liqueurs, and the claret and port later. Perhaps you prefer a liqueur first. Some of the gentlemen I have been with always began with a liqueur.'

'No'—Sir William stopped himself just in

time from saying, 'No, thank you, sir,' to the black-coated dignitary hanging anxiously on his words—'I drink nothing but water, my man,' floundering into the opposite extreme of too affable familiarity this time. 'You need not trouble to have out these things,' indicating the old cut wine-glasses and decanters, with a fine indifference, 'unless, of course,' stammering a little as he corrected himself, for the obligations of hospitality are strong in the class from which he had just emerged, 'when any gentleman is here who drinks wine.'

The butler knew that his master had been a grub before he became a butterfly, but the sentence about the wines floored the subordinate considerably. 'I say,' he remonstrated with himself, 'I can't stand this. "My man," indeed! from one who has pipe-clayed his own belts and polished his own shoes. Why, the Dean called me as often "Mr. Cumberbatch" as not. Good wages, light work, and time to one's self is all very well, and an inducement to put up with a master who has risen from the dirt, though he were the right heir, and is a likely enough young gentleman to look at. When it comes to that we're all Adam's sons.

But what are we coming to when wine ain't countenanced at a squire and baronet's table? There will be no broken bottles of claret, or sherry, or nothin' for the hall-table; and beer will vanish next. We're to be tea-tottlers, if not saints. What about the plate? Is silver or silver-gilt sinful? Are we all to eat off coarsest hearthenware, and sport sackcloth and ashes?'

From the caustic irony of his thoughts the reader may judge how deeply the butler was moved. Nevertheless Mr. Cumberbatch was able to bring in a note on a salver, and present it in a respectfully reproachful way to Sir William. He took it, opened and read it, and then handed it with a mystified air to his companion; yet it was no more than one of those notes which fly about the world launched by idly busy hands, and do not even require an answer.

It had only one reason for making a mark on reaching its destination. It was the daintiest note Sir William had ever received, written on black-edged note-paper like satin, supplied with both a crest and a monogram—a tiny version of what, in an enlarged form, had been shown and explained to Sir William

as the two hounds in a leash under an oak-tree, which constituted the heraldic bearings of the Thwaites, together with a fanciful miniature A. T.

The clear writing was a little bold for so small an epistle, while it conveyed the frankest, most courteous, and magnanimous of greetings.

‘DEAR SIR WILLIAM’ (it said),

‘I cannot help calling you so, and desiring to be the first to bid you welcome to the charming old place, which I know so well, and where I have been so happy. That you are in the room of my dear husband and beloved child is only an additional reason why I should have the most cordial interest in your welfare, if you will allow me to say so. I trust I shall soon have the pleasure of seeing you, and knowing you as a friend and near neighbour.’

‘Believe me, dear Sir William,

‘Yours sincerely,

‘ADA THWAITE.’

‘Well, Sir William?’ said Mr. Miles tentatively, with a smile, while he was turning

over rapidly in his mind the considerations which the note suggested. 'What can she want? She does not intend to become Lady Thwaite the Second by captivating young Sir William after she has disposed of old Sir John. Oh dear, no! She is a great deal too astute, while she is too mild and well-bred an adventuress for so violent and vulgar a dodge. She must be ten or fifteen years his senior. Mischief, not malice; pickings, not plunderings, are her cue. I know her of old. The prestige of becoming, by the assertion of a prior right, first and best acquainted with the gentleman, and then of trotting him out to the neighbourhood, on the *qui vive* for his arrival, if he turn out a decent specimen of resuscitated gentility, will count for something. There may be certain dowager perquisites over and above the bond, though she has a very pretty jointure, and he is saddled with a life almost as good as his own on the property. She will have the use of his horses when he does not require them, with offerings of game and fruit beyond what Netherton can produce. She will have the advantage of continuing the first female influence at Whitehills till he gets a wife.'

Mr. Miles's speculations were interrupted.

‘I suppose it is Sir John's widow, and it is good of her not to mind,’ said Sir William slowly. ‘But what am I to do about her? What does she expect me to do? I have no acquaintance with people of her kidney. I am not fit to go into such company; at least, not yet a bit.’

It was as if Sir William had proposed to reply to the note dashed off in a few minutes, by sitting down at his desk, squaring his arms, and inditing with care and deliberation, and not without the assistance of a dictionary, a formal, frozen letter, so precisely to the point that it might have been printed; and for that matter, its clear, firm, upright characters were not unlike print.

‘Oh, you will find no difficulty!’ said Mr. Miles cheerfully. ‘I know Lady Thwaite quite well, and will introduce you if you like. She is not a hard person to get on with, and she may, in turn, make you acquainted with the neighbourhood, which, in the sense of society, is not extensive—the less reason for you to withdraw into a shell. Let me oppose that line with all the weight you will allow me. It never did any man or woman good to

shun his or her kind, and hold them at arm's-length ; any amount of difficulties and rubbing the wrong way is preferable. Lady Thwaite means to be gracious, and it will not do for you—I speak as your friend and senior by thirty years—to meet her advances ungraciously. You must condone all former neglect, or anything that strikes you as forward in the present overture. I will confess to you that I do not give her credit for the finest perceptions or the most exquisite tact. But the world, which is not too nice in its tastes, does not agree with me. It counts her as pleasant and clever as she is good-natured, and votes her its greatest popularity. She is certainly good-natured, but she can be offended, though she is not very spiteful. She might do you harm by driving her pair of ponies all over the country, and airing her rebuff in the spirit of an accomplished gossip, who finds food for her calling everywhere. She can treat the matter either as a grievance or as a good joke, which would be rather the worst treatment of the two.'

'I don't care a rap,' cried Sir William, swelling a little with indignation ; 'she may, if she likes, for me. I shall be a poor creature,

indeed, if I mind what a parcel of old women say.'

'Softly, softly, my dear fellow!' asserted Mr. Miles, seeking to keep the peace. 'No man can afford to be so independent. In the second place, Lady Thwaite is not an old woman. What put such a shocking idea into your head? I shall be surprised if you take her for more than five-and-twenty—about your own age—when you see her. In reality she is a handsome, well-preserved woman between five-and-thirty and forty—no more.'

'I shall think the worse of her if she is made up to look what she is not, like a horse at a fair,' said Sir William a little doggedly, and with brutal plain speaking, as a recollection flashed across his mind of his sister Jen, with her spare, worn figure and face, and her patches of grey hair. Where had he read—for this ex-sergeant had been given to reading in his wiser moments—of such ashen patches as flakes of heaven's sunshine?

'You must remember she has a claim upon your forbearance,' represented Mr. Miles adroitly, not noticing the ebullition which smelt of the hole whence Sir William had been dug. 'Your first impulse to regard

it as good of her to write to you was not altogether wrong. Poor soul ! the fate of her boy cut her up considerably.'

'Very well, I'll go and see her if that will be of any use. I expect that is what it will come to,' said Sir William, as if he were submitting to a disagreeable necessity.

Mr. Miles had to be content with the concession. Holding intercourse with Sir William at this date partook a good deal of the nature of a one-handed conversation, and the one-handedness seemed to increase when the only share of the host in the post-prandial conviviality consisted in passing the decanters, which Sir William was scrupulous to do. The situation began to get intolerably heavy to a town-bred man accustomed to a very different description of dining out—something that he was used to regard complacently as having to do with 'the feast of reason and the flow of soul.'

'The cub is not a bad cub,' he grumbled, 'but I hope Lady Thwaite, or some one else, will have licked him into shape, so as to render him livelier, before I visit Whitehills again. Funeral baked meats would be a hilarious entertainment in comparison with this orgy on entering into possession.'

As a little variety after coffee had been sent in, Mr. Miles proposed a stroll in the dusk, comforted by the sense that things would not be so unsocial, since Sir William had not abjured a pipe along with a glass.

The two men went as far as one of the park gates, and stood leaning over, looking into the darkening high-road. It was as empty as most country roads at the season and hour, when all at once a close carriage appeared in the distance, looming out of the obscurity, jolting rather than bowling along.

Mr. Miles grew quite excited by this little adventure, though it was hardly within the bounds of possibility that it could bring other visitors to Whitehills. As the carriage drew nearer he had, at least, the satisfaction of announcing that he knew it. It was one of the Lambford carriages ; he had seen the liveries when he was down at Whitehills before. Lady Fermor must have been at Knotley to her banker or shopping. The old lady still did her business for herself, though it was a mercy to think she was too old for much which had made her earlier career notorious.

Mr. Miles's scandal against Queen Elizabeth was brought to an abrupt conclusion. The carriage stopped, the coachman kept his post, while a groom alighted. Presently it became evident that Lady Fermor wished the lamps lit before she proceeded farther, and that the groom was bound for the porter's lodge to get a light. For anything that the two lookers-on knew, they might be unseen by the occupants of the carriage. But it did not accord with Mr. Miles's old-fashioned politeness to remain hidden while he could help a lady. He had met Lady Fermor at old meets and hunting breakfasts at Lambford. He opened the gate, stepped briskly forward, leaving Sir William behind, and went up, hat in hand, to the window, which had been drawn down.

'Can I do anything for you, Lady Fermor?' he asked with the civility of a man of the world. 'I dare say you have forgotten me. My name is Miles. At one time I was often down from town on law business of poor Sir John's, and I had the pleasure of getting a little sport and enjoying Lord Fermor's hospitality when the scent held and we could get a run across country.'

Lady Fermor's old head, in a somewhat

juvenile bonnet, was thrust out of the window at once. Hauteur or reserve had never been among her faults.

‘I remember you perfectly, Mr. Miles. I am glad to renew our acquaintance. Will you be so good as to see that my groom lights the lamps so that one or other does not go out after the first hundred yards? I have been to Knotley, and stayed too long—let myself be benighted like a dissipated old woman. But what brings you down here just now? Is it anything about your new clown of a baronet?’

‘Hush! he is just behind me.’ Mr. Miles was forced to warn her.

‘There, bring him forward at once and present him to me, and to my grand-daughter. Iris is in that corner. Are you awake, child? Were you ever introduced to Mr. Miles?’

‘I think not; but I shall be happy to undergo the ceremony now,’ answered a fresh young voice.

‘Many thanks for the permission, Miss Compton; but, if you please, we’ll agree to defer the ceremony along with the presentation to Sir William. I can scarcely see you two ladies. We are only just come. The

time is not propitious ; let us wait for another and a happier day.'

Mr. Miles retreated on the plea of giving some directions about the lamps.

'I am not going to be the man to introduce Jezebel to him,' he was resolving. 'Let us be thankful she has, in a great measure, outlived her sorceries and power of ruin ; but they say she has taken to play in her age, like the most accomplished performer at Homburg in its worst days, or Monte Carlo. I believe the grand-daughter, poor thing ! is a nice girl to have come out of so bad a nest,' still pursuing his reflections.

Mr. Miles was hampered by the fear that Lady Fermor's personal remark might have reached the young man ; but as the carriage disappeared in the darkness from which it had emerged, and the lawyer rejoined his companion, he felt bound to deliver his testimony that danger had been near.

Sir William anticipated him by a remark in which a shade of doubt and discontent was just audible.

'I thought you said the Fermors were a bad lot.'

'A shocking bad lot, so far as Lord and

Lady Fermor go,' corroborated Mr. Miles emphatically.

'And yet you are quite thick with them.' The pupil suddenly turned the tables on his Mentor, still with the suspicion of mystification and annoyance in his manner.

'Not thick in your sense,' answered Mr. Miles promptly; 'not more than common courtesy demands. I am sorry that your nearest neighbours are the Fermors, Sir William. He, poor old wretch, may be reckoned nowhere now; but she—well, she forfeited her place in ladies' society ages ago. She has, in course of nature, given up hunting, and there are no more hunting breakfasts, or stud dinners, or election banquets at Lambford. The place used to be a great rearing-ground for hunters; and both host and hostess went in strongly for politics—at least, as far as the hurly-burly of elections. You will not come across him, and you may not encounter her; which, let me tell you, will be no loss for any young man who wishes to keep himself straight and avoid temptation. It is my duty to make you acquainted with the rumour that high play goes on whenever she can call up the ghost of company at Lambford.'

‘Does nobody go near her, then?’ said Sir William, dwelling on the isolation. The sharp ears of his adviser detected that it had a fascination for a lad who might be a pariah in his own person. Mr. Miles was induced to qualify his statement in policy as well as in verity.

‘Oh, not so bad as that! She raised with reason the hue and cry of the world against her, but it is an old, half-forgotten story: she has lived long enough to survive her punishment so far. The household at Lambford has been outwardly quiet enough for a dozen years. If people choose to lose money over napoleon or vingt-et-un, or no worse than whist, it is entirely their own doing, and is quite another matter from a public scandal. They say she is kind to poor old Lord Fermor. There has never been a word against Miss Compton, the grand-daughter, and she is likely to inherit her grandmother’s savings—although there are other grandchildren, not Comptons—Dugdales and Powells, the children of two daughters of Lady Fermor by her first husband. As far as I have heard, they have never been near Lambford; but Lady Fermor has taken up her relations, or they have taken

up her, again of late years. Even Lord Fermor's heir-at-law does not hold it wise to keep up a quarrel with the present mistress of the house. Lady Fermor, at her worst, maintained what I should call a brazen adherence to her Church whatever it had to say to her, and I have no doubt subscribes handsomely to parish charities; so her rector and rectoress, with their staff, must extend a certain amount of countenance and support to her: whether or not they regard her in the light of an interesting penitent, I cannot tell. Between the oblivion into which her past is falling, forbearance with her as an old woman, and pity for an innocent victim like Miss Compton, there is some amount of neighbourly amnesty. If I remember rightly, I have heard Lady Thwaite say she called at Lambford and had Miss Compton with her, though Sir John was not too well pleased. Her ladyship pretended that he wished to keep the acquaintance for his own entertainment, while she could not see that she was bound to know scandal which had happened before she was born. Shall we drive over to the quarries I told you of to-morrow, Sir William ?

CHAPTER VI.

BEAUTY.

LADY FERMOR was a bad woman; she had been a bad daughter and sister, a bad wife, mother, and grandmother. She had been weighed and found wanting in every relation. Lord Fermor was not her first husband, neither was she his first wife. It had only been after passing through the divorce court in a specially scandalous suit that she had attained her present position.

But that was half a century ago, years prior to the birth of Iris Compton's mother, Lady Fermor's only child to Lord Fermor. For many a long day the respectable world refused absolutely to condone the heinous offence. But time will serve to obliterate the blackest stains, and two facts were in Lady Fermor's favour. The sinner had for a period, which was equivalent to a moderately long lifetime,

refrained from her old sins against moral and social laws, and she was now an aged woman. These facts upheld self-interest, easy-minded tolerance, and charity in granting some renewal of the lady's passport to mix with other than the utterly reckless and polluted of her sex. Though Eastham was largely conservative, and its population was by comparison stationary, and in this respect far removed from the shifting inhabitants of a great town, Lady Fermor had neighbours nowadays who in the rising of new generations, the necessary prohibition of some topics from free discussion, and the reluctance of honourable people to touch pitch and be defiled, knew nothing further of the mistress of Lambford than that there had been something wrong where she was concerned, long, long ago, something which was better kept out of hearing, and gradually lost sight of.

Lady Fermor was too wise a woman not to avail herself of the slow, shy relenting, though she felt more contemptuous of it than grateful for it. She had never cared for the members of her own sex, while she had always been able to be on 'hail-fellow-well-met' terms with a wide circle of men, so long as

she was young enough to love company and enjoy her part in it. Such was the law of the world in which she lived. Nevertheless there was a small triumph to Lady Fermor in surmounting what she considered milk-and-water and bread-and-butter scruples. Besides, it was desirable for Iris, her grand-daughter, for whom her guardian had some consideration though little affection, that she should have the entrance to respectable houses presided over by women on whose reputations suspicion had not so much as breathed.

Lady Fermor had not secured the last boon for her daughter, Iris's mother; she had moved in none but the most Bohemian sets, and as a natural result had married ill, in every light save a worldly one, at her mother's instigation. She had led a wretched life, in which even the price for which she had sold herself had failed her. She had not possessed either spirit or power to rebel against her fate. Both she and her husband had died young, and she had left a helpless child, another girl, to the care of her mother's nearest relatives, who had made shipwreck of her fortunes.

Hard, heartless, coarse, and corrupted as Lady Fermor's career had left her, she felt

that she owed some reparation to her unhappy daughter's child, and she did not mean that Iris's history should resemble that of her mother. Lady Fermor put herself to the pains to secure an excellent governess, who did not refuse to enter the family at Lambford. She placed the pupil entirely under the teacher's charge.

The mistress of the house did not interfere, except it can be called interference, that in the early days of Miss Burrage's domestication, Lady Fermor did not consider it any breach of the contract or source of peril to her scheme, to encourage the little girl when she came to the drawing-room to mimic the small peculiarities and gaucheries of her schoolmistress, and to reward these exhibitions of talent by herself furnishing lessons in this histrionic school distinguished by its lack of generosity and tenderness and by its insolence. She was a well-qualified professor, and showed up poor Miss Burrage's weaknesses so as not only to cause the child Iris to dance with delight, but to awaken universal laughter among the drawing-room groups, made up of the fastest men and the shadiest women in that corner of the kingdom.

Iris used to cry bitterly, a little later in her life, over her share in the game, and she would wonder in her troubled mind whether the hard, flippant, or affectedly languid laughter was that crackling of thorns under a pot of which the psalmist wrote. It was not any direct word or act of Miss Burrage's which aroused the remorse and suggested the simile. On the contrary, when the poor lady could not help learning the extent to which so modest and retiring a person as she was had contributed to the entertainment of the drawing-room, she contented herself with discharging a delicate duty faithfully. She was forced for conscience' sake and in Iris's interest to say to the weeping girl, insisting in an agony of contrition on confessing her falseness to the obligations of friendship:

‘Very true, my dear, it is not right or kind to mock at your friends behind their backs, especially for such physical misfortunes—which are not merely bad tricks, as a lisp, or short sight, or a queer gait. But don't worry about it, only don't do it again. I am sure you never will. Do you think I cannot say all my absurdities off by heart at my age, or that I mind much other people's noticing

them, especially as many persons have a strong sense of the ridiculous which they cannot easily curb? You must remember jesting and laughter break no bones, though the fun might sometimes be suppressed with a good grace, and the suppression, strange to say, rather tend to increase true merriment.'

Miss Burrage was a very remarkable woman, though she could be guilty of lisping, and blinking, and stalking as she walked. She was not merely well informed and accomplished, a capital teacher with a high character for uprightness, steadiness, and kindness to her pupils. She had come to Lambford well aware of what she was doing, without saying anything to anybody—not even to herself, unless in the vaguest way, untempted by the salary her employers offered, undazzled by their rank, much as she would have gone into a Zenana or a lazar-house.

'I shall take no harm,' she told herself, 'and while I know I have not ten years' more work left in me, I should like to do something apart from earning my bread, for love's sake.'

Miss Burrage did more than give Iris a new experience, she brought to her a revelation.

In that intensely worldly house, where there was hardly a law save that of wayward inclination, when it was not that of vicious self-indulgence, Iris came into closest contact with a woman to whom the Divine command of duty was the ruling, well-nigh the sole power. At Lambford the pursuit of pleasure, though it had cooled from its passion and fever, and was now more of a hard, hackneyed round than a headlong race, continued to be the entire business of life. But Iris heard of work, not as the degrading curse, but as the ennobling blessing of man's earthly sphere.

Lady Fermor scarcely owned allegiance to mortal, simply paying the compliment to Lord Fermor, who had sacrificed all that was best worth having for her, of behaving to him with a mixture of careless, boisterous geniality and half-scornful forbearance. Yet she was capable of being mortified by her exclusion at the hands of the Lord Chamberlain from figuring in the Drawing-room lists. She would have grasped greedily at the slightest notice from her Queen, at whose honourable, virtuous life Lady Fermor nevertheless flouted, since it was beyond her comprehension.

Miss Burrage, somewhat homely and dowdy in those points of personal appearance and dress which were extravagantly valued at Lambford, in the humdrum drudgeries which seemed to many to constitute her calling, did not hesitate to believe that from no material throne but from the blue sky, high as heaven above her, God saw her and loved her, and held blessed communion with her as in the old-world Hebrew stories, when the same God walked among the trees of the Garden of Eden and spoke with the first man, Adam, and called the patriarch Abraham His friend.

It was not in Lady Fermor's bargain, as she had read it, to allow her grand-daughter to be reared an enthusiast, with a vocation for religion and virtue quite out of the common, and a troublesome, impracticable forte for righteousness. Lady Fermor considered that, with all her slips and stumbles, she had not been a bad churchwoman on the whole; she had always stuck to Mother Church as 'good form' to say the least, and she had her reward. She was willing that Iris should go farther and be more consistent in her walk; but as to her becoming over-pious and over-upright, a benevolent platform scold, or a meek martyr,

a silent rebuke to her neighbours in general, Lady Fermor would sooner have Iris a lunatic at once and dispose of her in the safe seclusion of an asylum.

As soon as Lady Fermor perceived the mischief which was at work—and it was her thorough scepticism which rendered her blind to it in the beginning—she did her best to stop the evil by dismissing Miss Burrage summarily, and taking Iris, who was then a girl of sixteen, into her grandmother's charge, to be cured by a course of such knowledge of the world and unrestricted gaiety as Lady Fermor could administer to her. But the harm was done; rather the bent was given to the twig and the inscription carved on the grain, which not all the king's horses and all the king's men could untwist and efface. There had been a seal set on Iris Compton's modest forehead, which Lady Compton's brow at its smoothest, least guileful stage had never borne. Iris was not wax, though she had proved pliant to the highest culture. She could not unlearn all she had been taught; she would not if she could.

Lady Fermor did not believe in supernatural aid, but she found in her grand-daughter a

quiet power of endurance and passive resistance which ended by baffling her. For she was a shrewd old woman. Her wickedness had destroyed many a faculty of mind and quality of taste, but it had not interfered much with her native shrewdness. She could submit, after a struggle, to the inevitable. She had no notion in those days of persecuting the girl, or driving her to greater folly or madness, or breaking her spirit. Nay, there was a degree of respect, along with the eternal grudge of evil against good, bred in the veteran, by the staunchness of the recruit to the marching orders which the miserable marplot Burrage had given. If Iris's mother could have had as clear an aim and been as constant to it, she need not have come to such irreparable grief.

Happily for all concerned, the sinner, Miss Burrage, had implanted the principle in Iris that goodness was not a charm confined to any sacred place, or solemn routine of daily engagements. The first binding debt the girl must pay was that rudimentary obligation which Lady Fermor had never dreamt of acknowledging in her day or contemplated transmitting to her successors, unless in the sense

of a superior force or a convenient form. It was that primitive call to reverence, obey, and be tender to every elder and ruler who is the ordinance of God, unless when the homage defies and outrages the unassailable majesty of truth, purity, and that beauty of goodness which can know no decay.

All these encounters were things of four or five years back. Iris had not seen Miss Burrage from the hour they were parted. The pupil had heard of the governess's death. Then Iris had shut her eyes and seen a lonely ill-trained little girl and a good woman striving with kind patience to win the child to all that was honest and lovely. 'And I have done nothing for her in return,' cried Iris, with the tears bursting forth; but after a while she admitted, with tender magnanimity, 'She was getting feeble before she left. I know she dreaded to be dependent, and shrank a little from a lonely old age. I wish, oh! I wish I could have cared for her; but since that was not to be, shall I, of all people, grudge to her the "Well done, good and faithful servant," when we shall not miss each other at last?' Lady Fermor had come to let Iris alone. The old woman was not fond of her grand-daughter.

What heart the elder retained was reduced to a fraction, to which the younger's position and qualities did not appeal. Occasionally Lady Fermor showed herself spiteful to Iris with a spite which might increase on provocation to a formidable malice. But as a rule the venerable matron—with so little to be revered in her, alas!—was reasonable, with a sort of masculine *bonhomie* about her which saved her from being guilty of petty tyranny, and caused her to like that the members of her family should be comfortable in their own way—always provided that way did not interfere with hers—contradiction roused the demon in her.

Iris was now over twenty years of age, a tall, slender girl, with a small, well-carried head. She had auburn hair, which she had worn since childhood, anticipating the fashion, in little clustering waves and rings low on her forehead. The mode had been her grandmother's decree when she discovered the chief defect in the little face, which was the disproportion of the broad, full forehead to what lay beneath it.

‘Good gracious, child! who ever saw such a top to a Queen Anne's sixpence of a face?’

You only want spectacles to grow up like Miss Cornelia—I forget her name—that schoolmistress of Dickens'. Every man will be frightened away by such a brow, unless he imagines he can save himself trouble by using it for a dictionary. Bid Woods take crisping-tongs or a wet brush and cover over that huge overlapping promontory as much as possible.'

Thus the defect was veiled, and Iris happened to be one of the very few women improved by borrowing a hint from her cousins the monkeys.

In spite of the ominous indication, nature had not destined Iris for a prodigy of brains, and Miss Burrage had not completed her pupil's demoralization in this respect. The girl was quick and intelligent, and had received a solid foundation to her education—that was all. As she grew up she proved enthusiastic in an age which has invented a new application for the adjective 'gushing,' and sympathetic in a dry and parched atmosphere which would have withered all save keen sympathies. She was fertile in resource. She had a natural gift of working skilfully in womanly fashion with her hands. The little face under

the softly-masked brow remained small, and when the hazel eyes were clear, the mouth rosy, while the cheeks too had their roses, the head was a wonderful reproduction in form, colouring, and expression of the cherub head which Sir Joshua painted in so many different poses, having found the original in the head of the Honourable Isabella Gordon, the kinswoman of a bouncing beauty of a duchess and of a crazy fanatic who led a national riot. But sometimes the cherub was under a cloud, with drooping eyelids, drooping mouth, and a pale, wistful little face more suggestive of piteousness than beauty.

The last was not the normal aspect of the girl. She had a healthy constitution, physically and spiritually touched with the highest, finest influences. She had been accustomed to an isolated life in that most depressing atmosphere of age without the attributes which render a hoary head a crown of glory. But she was far from friendless either in her own class or among servants, working people, and poor people. In the neighbourhood of Lambford there was a great deal of feeling for Iris Compton, an orphan under bad guardianship, though she never dreamt of herself as

an object of compassion. The Rector of the parish and his wife, well-meaning if somewhat self-conscious people, made a pet of her without any interference from Lady Fermor. Their only son, Ludovic Acton, was like a brother to Iris. That one of the Rector's daughters, nearest to Iris in age, was Iris's bosom friend, exalted by her lively imagination far beyond Lucy Acton's deserts, though Lucy was a good girl.

Iris had a happy temper and a mind that was neither suspicious, nor exacting, nor foreboding. She was always busy when she was by herself, as she was to a large extent when she was at home, with her share of the club books, her music, her art needlework, her favourites among Lady Fermor's poultry, her rockery, and such assistance as she was sometimes allowed to give Lucy Acton in the church choir and in parish work. Iris had a reserve of courage in her character, which lent an attribute of the heroic to the girlish womanhood. She had been thrown from her horse when riding with her groom near the town of Knotley, and had her collar-bone dislocated. She had been carried into a house, where she had given no trouble beyond the

fact that she had begged her hostess to allow the doctor who attended Lord and Lady Fermor to come and set the bone and take her home in his brougham, in order to spare her grandmother the shock of hearing of the accident before she knew it was nothing, and that Iris was safe back in her room at Lambford.

A painful accident occurred in the butler's pantry at Lambford ; an unlucky footman in drawing the cork of a soda-water bottle wrenched off the neck and cut his hand severely. Everybody called out a remedy, but nobody from the butler to Lady Fermor could bring himself or herself to look at the wound or touch it. Then Iris ran in from the garden, bound up the gash, kept the bandage in its place, gave brandy to the man when he grew faint, and stayed to help the doctor after he arrived in time to take up the severed artery, because no one else had sufficient nerve to make him or her willing to become the medical man's assistant.

Lady Fermor was very angry when she knew what had taken place, and said if she had been aware of the disgraceful chicken-heartedness of every soul about the place, she would have ordered each and all, on pain of

instant dismissal with a month's wages, to stand beside the doctor and prevent Miss Compton's being taken advantage of and put to such uses.

In spite of her ladyship's indignation, from that date, whenever a misadventure happened in the household, the sufferer was sure to make a secret humble application for help to Iris, though the girl protested laughingly her inexperience, and the absence on her part even of any intention of being trained for a nurse.

While things often went wrong at Lambford and in the world, Iris was as sure as she was of her own existence, that there was a Ruler over all Who ordered things aright, and brought good out of evil, and light out of darkness. She believed He had work for her to do in His world, and would show her more and more clearly what it was, if she waited for Him and did the least thing her hand found to do, with all her might, for the good of herself and her neighbours, to His praise. And when this scene of blessing and tribulation was ended, there remained the new heavens and the new earth wherein dwelt righteousness and the Lord of righteousness.

Iris on the whole was a happy girl, as who should be if she were not? She was kept ignorant, as those nearest the sinner often are, of the worst of the iniquities of the past at Lambford. Still she heard and saw much to distress her, but while she shrank from further enlightenment, the wrong-doing fell away from her as something entirely foreign to her nature and history. She was very sorry sometimes. She could not fail to be grieved and shocked, but it was not for her to judge and condemn those who were far older than herself, her natural superiors. She had an inextinguishable spring of hope in these years. She was always hoping the best. This was especially true of the wound dealt to her affections by the knowledge that neither her poor old grandfather in his great infirmity, nor her grandmother in the possession of all her powers of mind, but bending under the heavy burden of an aged body, cared much for her. It was well for Iris that she did not make much of herself; that she could trust, however vainly, that she might yet win greater confidence and regard from those before whom the treasures of a noble and gentle nature were like pearls cast under the

feet of swine, which only cause the brutes to turn and rend the giver.

Iris walked in the light of her innocence and rectitude in the love and fear of God, and in the honour of all men, unhurt by her harmful surroundings, one of the strange, sweet, incontestable answers to the carping, doubting question, 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?'

CHAPTER VII.

BY LADY THWAITE'S WORK-TABLE.

THERE are women one of the principal objects of whose lives consists in providing themselves with fine feathers, and in pluming the feathers after the wearers have got them. There are other women among whose chief aims is that of lining their nests luxuriously and agreeably, and displaying to envious neighbours those well-furnished nests. Not unfrequently these moods show themselves in the same women, and rather mark different stages of development than contrast of inclination in one person.

Lady Thwaite had married a man old enough to be her grandfather, without entertaining for him any of the sentiments of respect, gratitude, or pity, which could by the wildest flight of fancy have stood for parallel sympathies and mutual inclinations.

She was one of a family of many poor pretty daughters, belonging to the slenderly-provided-for widow of a hunting squire-parson, or 'squarson' as the type is sometimes entitled in Eastham. She hankered after the flesh-pots of Egypt, especially in the shape of fine feathers, and she saw no other way of procuring these than by the marriage which she made.

To do Lady Thwaite justice she was just the wife old Sir John wanted, with the signal exception of giving him an heir to live and flourish after him instead of handing over Whitehills to degenerated Thwaites. She disappointed him in nothing else, and she was reasonably contented with the result she had achieved. So having accomplished two things which the world thoroughly approved, done well for herself, and made the most of her gains, disdaining either to proclaim to the public or to whisper to her own heart the weak points of the situation, she was popular; she was regarded as a fairly fortunate woman and a highly available acquaintance. Unlike old Lady Fermor in everything else, Lady Thwaite was like her in this, that both of them had always dispensed with female friends, and

been perfectly satisfied with acquaintances of their own sex. Going back so far as her girlish days, Lady Thwaite's mother and sisters had been no more to her than intimate acquaintances. The point at which the resemblance broke down was that neither had Lady Thwaite shown any need of male friends. Beyond the wide, easy bond of acquaintanceship—and no woman cultivated more acquaintances—she had been sufficient for herself.

Mr. Miles, before he left, was as good as his word, in introducing Sir William to the former mistress of Whitehills. She struck an unsophisticated stranger as a fair-haired woman with a figure inclined to stoutness, and a fine presence which was 'stunning' to him. Her black silk and crape and white cap set off her fairness, diminished her stoutness, and caused her to look younger than she really was. She received him with ease and friendliness, which might have been still more cordial if he had been able to advance half-way to meet her. There was nothing distressing in her allusions to Sir John. She spoke of the loss she had sustained with no more than the quiet gravity and gentle sadness which the death of so old a man was calculated to excite in his kindred

of the second generation. She was his widow, no doubt, as her dress indicated, but only a widow who had been his contemporary could have experienced sharp pain or keen desolation at old Sir John's having passed away before her, by ever so short a time. Very soon the conversation took a more cheerful turn, and Lady Thwaite's social gifts, as a lively woman of the world, came out to anybody capable of appreciating her.

The interview had not proved very formidable, and from the date of the introduction the gentleman found himself, he could hardly tell how, in frequent communication with the lady. He did not like her particularly, though she was good enough to lay herself out to please him; but he had a sense that he ought to feel obliged to her for bearing no grudge against him after he had turned her out of his house, and he had an honest wish to serve her.

Lady Thwaite approved of Sir William's intention and recognised his capabilities of usefulness. She speedily extracted from him sundry china jars, a marquetry table, and a pair of old Dutch leather screens which she considered would be acquisitions in her rooms.

Netherton was already a wonderfully cosy, pretty dowager-house. Lady Thwaite had kept a careful, fostering eye on it, ever since she married Sir John, and particularly after the death of their son. She had moved in the background, but not the less successfully on that account. She had seen that the house was in perfect repair. She had bestowed unremitting attention on the improvement of the grounds. The place was not, and could not be like Whitehills. It was only a smallish, nineteenth-century country house, built in the earlier years of the century, when bow-windows were synonymous with light, not shade. The lawn was almost too like velvet in its pile, to be spoilt as it often was, to the mortification of the one adult gardener, by tennis. There was a carriage-drive in the perfection of order, and a belt of rarer though younger shrubs and trees than any at Whitehills. Altogether it was a very different establishment from the ill-kept, run-out, over-crowded house from which Lady Thwaite had been led by Sir John.

The lady, like Mr. Miles, was gratified to find the representative of the family, whom she had elected to make her *protégé*, hopefully

docile and tolerably presentable. Yet she felt a pang in connection with the thing which had gone nearest her heart, in the whole course of the deliberately planned, worldly prosperity of her life. It was the failure of the hopes with regard to her son.

‘To think such broad, manly shoulders and such a resolute mouth should have been given to a lout, a common soldier, while my boy, the true heir of Whitehills, was like a thread-paper and had no more firmness in his poor loose lips than when he was a senseless baby,’ was her inaudible cry on the first peep she got at the new-comer.

But she swallowed the bitterness and was altogether bland and propitious, finding the subjects for conversation as became a fair, fat, well-bred woman, so good-natured and accessible in her circle that there sometimes crept out just the faintest suspicion of ladylike wheedling and cajoling in her attitude.

Lady Thwaite was amused, too, by Sir William. She liked amusement as well as profit, and to be amused no less than to confer amusement. She sometimes split on this rock in spite of her general judiciousness. Her consistency was not perfect any more than

the consistency of the rest of the world. She could not always steer skilfully between her so-called friend and her jest. She had been known to sacrifice the former to the latter, though it was an exceptional imprudence.

It was that fresh season of the year when spring is still glad, and not yet growing languid as it passes into the heat of summer. Chequers of sunshine and shade were woven on the floor of the pleasant room, where the fire still gleaming on the tiles was tempered by the open door into the little conservatory, bringing wafts of fragrance from violets, lilies-of-the-valley, and jonquils. A far-away window open to the garden admitted the full-throated singing of blackbirds and thrushes in the early joy of mating. The silvery light crossing the soft gloom, kindled up here and there in chair-covers, portières, and cushions, admirably blended lines of cool blue and white creton, mellow olive velvet and dead-gold plush. There was an effect like the wavering motion of leaves on the dull reds, and blues, and greens of the Turkey carpet, an ivory-tinted softness and delicacy in the revived satin-wood with its fine hand-painting of flowers and fruit, contrasted with the rich

black of ebony in the framework of the piano, chairs, and settees. Of the pictures on the sober grey walls, that of old Sir John, padded, buttoned up, and looking as if he had just come from successive visits to his barber and his tailor, was in the merciful shadow ; while Lady Thwaite's likeness, in the light, showed her considerably crowned with a small cap, and draped in a shawl so as not to look younger than her husband's daughter. There was also a careful representation of a baby shrouded in a cloak, not to be superseded by a bluff or prim little boy sitting on his pony or standing by his dog, the ordinary style for the heirs of the family as preserved at Whitehills.

Though April days invite to dawdling idleness out of doors, the April sun shone on manifold signs of busy idleness within the house. The temperate beams scattered themselves freely on newspapers and books, a well-filled music-stand, the paraphernalia of easel and colour-boxes, and a dainty work-table containing half a dozen pieces of pretty work—all of which were necessities of life to Lady Thwaite.

Sir William, late private in one of her

Majesty's infantry regiments, remained an incongruous figure, not at home in such an *entourage*. It must be confessed that he was not in himself entertaining, so Lady Thwaite had therefore ensconced him in one of those torturing, retreating, subsiding seats of the second-last fashion, in which no man who was not to the manner born could have settled himself otherwise than uncomfortably and awkwardly. She was talking to him in her smiling, fluent manner on subjects of which he could know nothing. If he answered at all, he must either express the most refreshing ignorance, or perpetrate the most grotesque mistakes. She asked him to help her with the arrangement of some of her silks and wools, and he did not see how he could refuse to oblige her by declining to comply with her demurely-put request. But his proceedings, while she would take care that they did no harm to her property, must be more ludicrous than those of Hercules with Omphale's spinning-gear ; for Hercules had the unfettered mien of a demi-god, while Omphale's establishment was sure to have been simplicity itself. Sir William's spasmodic actions in the Netherton drawing-room bore

more resemblance to the uncouth demonstrations of a bull in a china-shop.

‘Ah! there is somebody coming,’ Lady Thwaite cried, interrupting her little game, as a shadow crossed the window. ‘I believe it is Iris Compton. Don’t go, Sir William,’—detaining him when he sought to accomplish a shame-faced retreat. ‘You may rise if you will, that is if you can. Let me give you my hand. Dear! dear! I must bid Charles take away these low chairs with their sloping backs. They are a snare to half the people who sit down in them. Miss Compton ought to be one of the belles of the neighbourhood, though her fine figure is rather slight even for a girl.’ She favoured him with a preparatory criticism, sitting serene in her own becoming matronly bountifulness of outline. ‘There is certainly a suspicion of red in her hair—ill-natured people call it red—and her face is too small; it is even inclined to be chubby. But in spite of trifling defects she would be one of the county beauties if she were properly seen. She goes out very little, however; her relations are very old and don’t live in the world; all the same you must know her like everybody else some day, and I

am charmed that the encounter should take place here. I am fond of young people meeting and making themselves at home at Netherton. It is not so very long since I was young myself, but my youth passed soon,' remarked Lady Thwaite with an echo of pensiveness in the reflection, pausing as if she expected to be contradicted, and then going on with a furtive smile, faintly acidulated, at the omission of any contradiction, 'Poor dear Sir John liked the society of his contemporaries, naturally, and I was only too happy to accommodate myself to his tastes. It was no less my pleasure than my duty, and you cannot think the comfort it is to me to remember that now. Ah! here she comes.'

Sir William recollected perfectly what he had heard of Miss Compton and her grandmother, Lady Fermor. He had struggled out of the cramping chair, and, as he stood stiffly, feeling very much in the way, he glanced up, expecting to see a woman like Lady Thwaite, but younger. His eyes fell on the tall, erect figure of a girl like a straight, slim sapling. She wore a dark blue velvet gown and jacket, with a little cap of the same colour. Beneath it was the loveliest silken

thatch of hair, not unlike his own in hue, but how different in texture, as it strayed and curled at its own sweet will! Beneath the thatch was a line of white forehead and fine brows, with the rest of a little face lit up by hazel eyes, half eager, half wise. The round cheeks were rosy; still rosier was the delicate mouth, which had no inherent weakness in the curve that broke its straight line. She was smiling upon him, and going through her part of the introduction as if she liked it, and wished him well.

He had not seen, he had not so much as conceived of a beautiful, simply refined girl like this, with so much of the child in her that she gave him the sense of being open and frank as the day. Yet there was something in her which daunted him, more than he was impressed by anything in the mature woman of the world beside him, though when he was beside Lady Thwaite she had him in her power, and caused him to do her behests.

In the presence of a third person Lady Thwaite was doubly bound to refrain from the faintest approach to making game of her kinsman and guest. But she imagined Sir

William did not see what she was about. Iris Compton was not much of a third person, while her company enhanced the fun of the thing to such an extent that Lady Thwaite could not resist prolonging the joke, were it only to watch its effect on Iris, and how far her gravity would stand the strain to which it was subjected.

Lady Thwaite sought to inveigle Sir William back into the fellow of the detestable, cavernous chair. She gravely asked his opinion of the genuineness of her old Chelsea. She said Miss Compton would excuse them if they went on winding their silk, after a scene in a great English classic which Sir William must recall.

Iris's carnation cheeks flushed a rosier red. She started up, as when she ran to the aid of the unfortunate footman with the gash across his palm. It was a mental wound which at this moment called for her aid, and she could no more withhold it from the second than from the first sufferer. To be art and part in hurting anybody's feelings wilfully and wantonly, was about as impossible to Iris Compton as to conspire in dealing a stab with a knife, or to refrain from seeking to stem the

flow of the life-blood. Nay, she went farther in her sensitiveness—her own feelings were hurt in the hurt feelings of her neighbours, with a keenness which was positively painful. In addition, she endured uncalled-for remorse and affront as if she were accessory to the offence.

Iris protested quickly, ‘No, no, Lady Thwaite, I can help you far better—Sir William will forgive me for saying so. Besides, what has become of the ingenious winding-machine you showed me the last time I was here? Ah! I see it on the table in the corner. If you have tired of using it let me try it.’

She sat down, made the machine fast to the table, and twirled it round with her light fingers. She kept up the other ball of small-talk with Lady Thwaite, making it turn upon the weather, about which anybody surely could venture an observation. Then she referred tentatively to the meteorological signals from America transmitted across the ocean. At last diverging adventurously to sea voyages, she said pleasantly that she believed Sir William Thwaite was the only person present who had any experience in that

respect. The manœuvre was as prettily ingenious as the winding-machine, without containing a grain of affability or patronage.

He could not help answering the bright appeal. He said he had made two voyages, the one in rough and the other in fine weather, and he could not help thinking she—the ladies before him—would have liked the sea and the great steamer after they had grown accustomed to the motion of the vessel.

Lady Thwaite, restored to her good behaviour, professed an ardent interest in porpoises, albatrosses, and flying-fish, as if each belonged by right to the other, jumbling the whole together in a somewhat astounding fashion for so clever and fully-equipped a woman.

Then more visitors came in whom Lady Thwaite went to entertain, while Miss Compton stayed for a few minutes talking to Sir William. She set him at his ease in the simplest, kindest manner. She made him feel that he was the conveyer to her of some unsophistically, graphically given descriptions of wonderful places where she had never been and was never likely to be. He was able to tell her particulars worth hearing of the

Hooghly and the Sunderbunds, the Ganges and the Ghauts, Delhi and Benares, and far-away Afghanistan.

Suddenly he broke off and startled her with the mute eloquence of those dark-blue eyes of his, before he began to speak on a totally different theme. He was so stirred and roused by her sweetness and fellow-feeling that he was moved to confide in her.

‘I have not read much,’ he said modestly, ‘mostly travels and histories of campaigns such as they provide for fellows in barracks; but I have been turning over some of the Whitehills books since I came here—stories and that kind of stuff. I think I know the book and picture Lady Thwaite referred to. But if I am like that nabob fellow—though I have not brought home shawls and muslins and fine stones—how can she compare herself to the woman who tried to take him in?’

‘Oh, she did not mean to carry out the comparison; she was not in earnest,’ said Iris, colouring, very much in earnest herself, to reassure him and to withdraw if possible the sting from the absurd simile. ‘Thackeray is so popular that a trifle recalls his famous scenes, don’t you see?’

He did see that she was good to him. Was she one of those fine young ladies—as good as she was fine—of whom Jen had spoken? But if so, she was only the farther removed from him. Whatever her grandmother might be, these lips of hers looked as if they had never spoken an unbecoming word, while his had been soiled by the coarse language of the barrack-yard and the ale-house. He was surprised that he could have taken it upon him to speak to her; yet here again she was in her innocent ignorance asking him more questions about punkahs and howdahs, elephants and tigers, and pretending interest in his answers, so that he could not reply shortly and evasively.

Lady Thwaite cast a doubtful, inquiring look at the couple.

‘Can that girl be making a dead set at my Sir William? Did I ruffle that gentleman? Has he got on so fast that his pride has to be studied? My humblest apologies to him; my bear is learning to dance. It is the first time she has seen him. If it were anyone else I should know what to think; but Iris Compton is half a goose, half a saint, and she may just as well leave her settlement in life to that for-

midable grandmother of hers, who will never suffer another finger—not that of the person principally concerned—in the pie.’

He rode home wondering if he should ever see Iris Compton again, and assuring himself that it did not signify in the very least whether he did or not. She was a creature made of another clay. He was a fallen spirit beside her. In her beauty, which he compared to that of an angel, and her tenderness of heart she could feel compassion for his degradation and for his miserably false position ; but as to drawing nearer to her, the step was impossible, and he would die sooner than take advantage of her. Yet apart from so gross an abuse of her charity, he had a notion that he could have gone on speaking to her, enticed by her gentle encouragement—even telling her of Jen and Lawrie and beseeching her forgiveness as if he had sinned against her in his sins against them, and in his rough falls—begging for counsel and guidance in the troubled life which lay before him.

Iris Compton drove back to Lambford and went to her grandmother with the scrap of news she would care to hear.

‘I have met Sir William Thwaite, grand-mamma. He was with Lady Thwaite at Netherton when I called,’ she addressed a wizened mummy in an envelope of sealskin drawn over a quilted woollen dressing-gown, hugging her dressing-room fire, but turning on the speaker a pair of the keenest, most undimmed, cat-like eyes that were ever sunk in the puckered, fallen-in face of a human being who had seen more than eighty summers and winters.

‘You were in luck, child,’ said the old lady, propitiated by the offering. ‘What was the ogre like?’

‘He was not very big,’ answered Iris with momentarily stupid literalness, puzzled at the same time to give a description that would satisfy her grandmother. ‘He seemed a good sort of young man. He was homespun certainly, but he did not assume anything. I rather liked him.’ Then she went on with a great deal more animation. ‘I don’t think Lady Thwaite was behaving well to him. She was amusing herself at his expense when I went in, and she wished me to join in the amusement. From what he said afterwards, I think he saw what she was about. I hope

it was not officious in me to try and stop it, but I could not stay and look on and laugh in my sleeve, as she meant me to do.'

Lady Fermor did not care either for what her grand-daughter had thought or done, though these were exactly the points which would have bulked largely in the minds of most mothers and grandmothers. She was only interested in Lady Thwaite and Sir William.

'Just like Ada Thwaite,' she began, with an impatient snort; 'always taking her own in the way of diversion when she cannot take it in more solid coin, picking the *parvenu's* pockets, no doubt, and in the act showing him up to the polite world.'

'But she is very good-natured,' remonstrated Iris, beginning to repent of her own censure; 'she put herself about to chaperon me to the hunt-ball before Sir John's death, and she drove all round by Cavesham the other day, to ask at the station for your parcel, which was supposed to have been left there.'

'She is as fond of company as the youngest chit she professes to take care of; and she wanted an excuse to call and hear what I

had to say about the bumpkin Baronet. She thought I might remember something of wild Dicky Thwaite; but though I have met one of his nephews, he had done for himself and left this part of the country long before I came to it. I suppose she will imagine I saw Noah go into the ark next. You have never told me what the man is like.'

'He seemed a good sort of young man,' repeated Iris not very clearly.

Lady Fernor gave another snort.

'That is nothing to the purpose, unless you thought of engaging him for a footman,' she said ironically. 'I conclude you know a man when you see him. Is he a fine-looking fellow under his rough rearing? or is he a cut below being polished? I have known the day when I should not have had to take at second-hand the report of any young spark in my neighbourhood.'

'I think he is rather nice-looking—I should say so—yes, I am sure; he has good eyes,' hesitated Iris, growing confused under the cross-examination and the certainty of giving fresh offence. Conscious, too, alas! that, though she had shared in the lively curiosity of the neighbourhood, still, after the first

glance, she had not bestowed the most careful inspection on Sir William's outer man.

'You will tell me next that he has a nose and mouth like other people,' cried Lady Fermor scornfully, 'and that he speaks when he is spoken to. But I will judge of Sir William Thwaite for myself. I shall drive over and leave Lord Fermor's card, and then invite the man to a family dinner. He is our nearest neighbour, and we have not too many available neighbours; only old fogies and young scamps out-at-elbows, and long-faced hypocrites. I don't know what has become of all the honest, open-hearted, open-handed fellows I knew when I was young.'

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR WILLIAM'S FIRST FAMILY DINNER.

LADY FERMOR was as good as her word. She left Lord Fermor's card, she invited Sir William, and, although he had refused other invitations, he accepted this, drawn by an attraction he fought against in vain.

‘The old woman may not be too particular,’ Sir William brooded; ‘if all is true that is said of her, she ought not to be. But Miss Compton will not look twice at a clod-hopper—at worse than a clod-hopper, a wild, senseless brute when I was drunk. By George, if she heard of what happened at Nihlpoor—that I rubbed shoulders with the lash, the next thing to rubbing shoulders with the gallows! How dare I go where she is? What if I were found out, and kicked out, as I deserve to be?’

He went, however, committing the presumption, and braving the risk.

Lambford had been an old house not unlike Whitehills, but, in an evil hour for architectural harmony, Lord Fermor had built an addition to the house in the utmost discordance with the original, and in the worst possible taste. He had tacked on a new wing twice as high and half a dozen times as ornamental as the main body of the building. The entrance, by a great flight of stairs, penetrated this wing, and in this favourite quarter were the public rooms, with their ceilings at such an altitude that the size of the apartments did not keep them from looking like telescopes. As much light as the season permitted poured between the curtains of rows of great windows extending from the floor midway to the ceiling. Huge heavy marble chimney-pieces surmounted the great grates of polished steel. When Lady Fermor came to Lambford she had caused the principal rooms to be refurnished according to her theory. This was, if a man wanted a handsome dining-room and drawing-room—and if they were not handsome, what were they?—bid him go in for good bright colours, massiveness of form, and

plenty of carving. Above all, don't let him grudge plate-glass and gilding. She hated the dim, dirty tints that people pretended to admire nowadays. And as for lattice panes of green glass, worm-eaten chests and cupboards, rickety rush-bottom chairs, and blinking wax candles instead of paraffine lamps, she would not harbour such trash in her garrets. Lambford had been a place to strike the eye when she ordered its upholstery. It had been as magnificent as some of the saloons she had seen in Paris. She admitted the gilding had become tarnished, and the gorgeous colours in the big patterns had parted with much of their splendour; but the solid mahogany, walnut, and rosewood, and the colossal mirrors had worn well, and would last her time. For true superbness of style recommend her to the era which reflected the influence of the first gentleman in Europe, George Prince Regent.

Sir William Thwaite was certainly impressed when he was shown into the loud, loaded, once-costly drawing-rooms, where there was not a particle of evidence of culture beyond an appetite for barbaric weight and glitter, and where the worn, smirched traces of age brought no kindly air of family use

and wont—no sense of domestic charities. Lady Fermor had presided with spirit all her own over a great house, but she had never made it a home. Lord Fermor, who had been born and spent his youth there, had no home-like feeling attached to the place, except what belonged to a shut-up portion of the older half of the house, to his private sitting-room and the billiard-room, and to the stables and the kennels, when he was still able to frequent them. Iris was the single member of the household, out of the servants' hall, who had found a home at Lambford ; but her home was centred in the old schoolroom, which she was allowed to keep for her morning and working-room, and her white, dimity-hung bedroom.

To Sir William's uninitiated eyes Lambford looked as grand as a palace—not so far removed in its atmosphere, barren of unsensual, unselfish aims, and pure disinterested affections, from some of the marvellous Indian palaces which he had visited, while it was not in a palace like this that he would have expected to meet a princess like Iris Compton. On the whole, mock^{ed} palace as it was till Iris came in, he knew himself less out of his old

element than he had been conscious of feeling in Lady Thwaite's drawing-room. Lady Fermor, with her strong passions unbridled in the violence of their prime, her long expatriation from any save the fastest and shadiest society, had forfeited in a large measure any claims she had ever possessed to gentle bearing. She was not very different, except in accent and phrase, from the coarse, untrammelled queens of some of the baggage-waggon.

But to do Lady Fermor justice, there were other reasons why Sir William should feel at ease with her. All that was most honest and least vindictive in her nature, came out when she encountered simple youthful manhood, as the best in many bad women is shown where little children are in question. Men had always exercised far more influence over Lady Fermor than women; and it is just possible that if she had come in contact with better men when she began her career, if she had even borne a son in her younger days, she might have been a very imperfect but a far less guilty woman than she had lived to prove herself.

She had Sir William brought up to her sofa,

where she sat by the side of a blazing fire with her Indian shawl wrapped round the bent, shrunk figure which had once been that of a tall woman, while the yellow old lace of her ruffles and head-dress flapped about her shrivelled hands and creased and crumpled face. She looked him through as he came up to her, and then she rose with the slow stiffness of her years ; but there was no stiffness in the cordial tones of the cracked but still resounding voice with which she greeted him, as her young neighbour and friend.

She bid him sit down beside her, and began to talk of horses and dogs, of which in truth he did not know much. But as most young men have at their command some sort of vocabulary where these interesting lower animals are concerned, and as she led the conversation, the circumscribed character of his information did not become conspicuously apparent. She went on to farming, of which Mr. Miles had been talking to the Squire of Whitehills, and on which his mind had been naturally dwelling a good deal, since he came to the place. Lady Fermor in ruling for her lord had done a considerable amount of high-handed farming for him. She was quite com-

petent to speak on the rotation of crops, on shorthorns, South Downs, and Berkshire pigs. And her listener would have followed her vigorous if one-sided details with comprehension and tolerable interest, if his attention had not been distracted by the obligation of listening for a coming footstep, varied by an aroused, disturbed apprehension—since he was not acquainted with the habits of the dwellers in these regions—that Miss Compton might not appear or dine with him and her grandmother, as he had counted upon her doing.

At last Iris came in, advanced straight to him, and with an outstretched hand and her eyes raised to his face said, without the slightest semblance of insincerity, that she was very glad to see him. At that moment he felt as if it would have been a relief if she had stayed away, he was so dazzled by the vision before him, and mingled with the dazzling there was so little self-assurance and so much trepidation—approaching to discomfiture. He had seen ladies in full dress as he had seen feasts before, but both had been at a distance, and with not the most remote idea of holding companionship with the ladies any more than of partaking of aught save the broken meat of

the feast. Besides, he had never seen any lady like Iris Compton.

Lady Fermor did not approve of the change in the style of dress for girls, which has marked the close of the century, any more than of the odd transformations in furniture. In the former case the impetus is in the opposite direction. There is no childish, mawkish affectation, or crazy, hare-brained rusticity there. But to waste silks and satins, ay and velvets, for every night in the year, on chits who had not attained the promotion of a wealthy marriage or even of a promising engagement, appeared to the old lady the height of extravagant folly. Youth did not need much decking out, and what became of one of the principal factors in a girl's making a sensible marriage if she had not fine clothes to look forward to? She might well relax in her good behaviour. Better give her a house and servants and carriages at her command at once, than leave her to refuse the rich man who did her the favour to make her an offer, and accept the beggar who took her silly fancy. It made no difference to Lady Fermor that Iris was not particularly fond of fine clothes. The matron acted on the broad ground of the principle involved.

Iris wore an Indian muslin with a little bunch of blue field hyacinths at her throat, agreeing with the turquoise brooch that fastened them, the turquoise earrings and bracelets, and the turquoises set in the handle of her ivory fan. But Sir William's breath was taken away by the look of the slender slip of a girl in the soft white zephyr-like dress, which seemed to suit her entirely, with the touches of blue, like scattered flowers of the forget-me-not, setting off her white skin, the vermilion in her lips and complexion, and the auburn of her hair—above all, the innocent youthfulness of her face.

Sir William felt abashed by the fair sight. He shrank secretly from the notion that he might be 'paired' with her, which seemed to him not unlikely from their similarity in age, and because there were no other young people present. He was not aware that his rank and importance as a stranger awarded Lady Fermor to him, and that Iris was destined, as a matter of course, to the only other guest present, a middle-aged Major Pollock from Knotley.

Lord Fermor, though in fact younger in years than his wife, was too feeble to take his place at table. The company formed a *partie*

carrée, somebody said, which was a statement as mysterious as any sentence in a Chaldean manuscript to Sir William ; but he swallowed it with courageous stolidity, as he did many more things. He sat at the right hand of Lady Fermor, and continued to hear her opinions on farm stock and the grain markets. He was not asked to carve. Her ladyship had accepted a fashion which chimed in with the disqualifications that had long been invading the powers of the host and hostess of Lambford. Everything was carved at the sideboard. There was actually nothing to disturb the guest, whom her ladyship delighted to honour, in his proper business of dining and listening to his companion, unless he let his eyes and thoughts stray to the couple opposite. He had conceived an instant aversion to Major Pollock, which subsequent inquiries justified. He was a gentleman of decidedly objectionable antecedents, whose only merit, if it could be called a merit, was that, when a young man, he had stood by Lady Fermor in the miserable crisis of her history. She boasted that she never forgot an old friend, therefore Pollock continued an *habitué* of the house, though, in this instance, the wicked had not flourished

like a green bay-tree. The Major had played what might have been a pleasant, but what had also been an unmistakably losing game throughout the greater part of his life. His ungilded sins were not of such a remote date as to have sunk into partial oblivion like Lady Fermor's; one especially—an affair at a London club, which his fellow-men had elected to be of an aggravated character, and had insisted on regarding with righteous indignation—had very nearly done for the gentleman. This was true even in the wilds of Eastham, to which he had returned with his fallen fortunes, setting up a bachelor's household—fastidious only on the grand questions of meat and drink—in a house which belonged to his family, in the market town of Knotley.

All these parings of biography Sir William picked up and fitted together later. His dislike to his *vis-à-vis*, with his burly person, exceedingly black hair, twirled moustache, and crows' toes, was purely instinctive. Sir William had not even the excuse of finding Major Pollock on a detestably friendly footing with Miss Compton, such as the gentleman's freedom of the house and the uncereemonious terms he was on with Lady Fermor might

have warranted. It was clear that even Miss Compton's unsophisticatedness and good-nature rebelled against the mingled leer and sneer which constituted Major Pollock's odious expression where women were concerned. She looked as if she had an uneasy sense—similar to the old pricking of the thumbs—of something evil, beyond her power to cope with and remedy, in her vicinity. Even a neophyte could not mistake the constrained civility of her bearing to her partner at table. He submitted to take his cue from her, probably with the sullen, cowed notion that Lady Fermor, who kept all that remained of her graceless satellites well in hand, approved of her granddaughter's conduct in this particular, and did not choose that a notorious black sheep should approach too closely to the girl, with the danger of sullyng her white unimpeachableness.

The *contretemps* of the evening occurred when Sir William drew back his glass, a third time, as it was about to be filled.

‘What is it, Sir William?’ cried the old woman of the world, puzzled, through all her accumulated knowledge, at this marked instance of abstinence. ‘If you will not have

Chateau Margeaux, try Lafitte or Madeira ; or do you prefer dry Champagne ? We must have some brand that will suit you. Let me help you myself.'

'Thank you, my lady,' said the incorrigible Sir William, not troubled by the form of address, but showing symptoms of agitation at the hospitable contention which he foresaw awaited him, and which was inexpressibly painful to him, 'I don't drink anything except water ; I never do.'

'Not drink anything except water !' exclaimed Lady Fermor, in so high a key as to have attracted the attention of the whole party if it had been otherwise engaged, and not lying in wait for any general discussion. 'I have heard that the old, under-bred temperance movement is spreading in odd quarters, and making the noise in the world which empty tomfoolery always makes. Acton,' naming her rector, 'has taken it up—Bands of Hope, coffee-houses and all, "for the good of his working-men," he says, as if his working-women never entered an ale-house, or as if his claret has anything to do with their beer. But you are not a parson ; there is no earthly call for you to serve as an example.'

‘It is not that; it is my own look-out,’ he stammered bluntly, fidgeting and crimsoning, thinking that he was badgered, and conscious that his temper was rising, but striving to bridle it in such a presence; ‘a friend made me promise——’

‘Oh, bother such promises!’ interrupted Lady Fermor, with impatient scorn; ‘I wonder you pay heed to such stuff. Some officious idiot has taken advantage of you.’

While he listened—amidst what seemed to him the splendour of the Lambford dining-table, with its blaze of lights, its glittering silver and crystal, its sweet flowers and dainty cheer—there rose up before him the interior of a soldier’s hut, and the spectacle of Jen, worn out by her efforts to save him, pleading with her last gasp that he might redeem himself from destruction.

His manners had not that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. He lost command over himself. His blue eyes sparkled like steel. ‘I will do as I choose in what is nobody’s business save my own,’ he shouted, looking round him fiercely; ‘and whatever you or other gentlefolks may think of promises, by God, I will keep mine!’

He brought down his clenched hand with violence on the table.

The effect of a sudden thunderclap so loud as to warrant the suspicion that the house had been struck, might have borne some resemblance to the shock Sir William produced. Lady Fermor, possibly for the first time in her long life, sat open-mouthed, with her shaking hand arrested on its road to a bottle, which a servant was presenting to her, lying orthodoxly on its side.

Major Pollock swore a private oath, which had to do with a 'canting brute,' champed his moustache to prevent an audible 'Haw! haw!' or a snarling reminder of his warning of what might come of ladies having anything to do with the scum of a barrack-yard such as he had known, even though this man had been discovered to represent a baronet and squire.

Iris looked half frightened, but her eyes shone.

The servants, not unaccustomed to extraordinary demonstrations at Lambford, preserved their composure, though they were posed by a novelty.

Sir William, who had become as pale as he had been red, rose to his feet. 'I have to beg

everyone's pardon if I have given offence and been insufferably rude,' he said, with proud humility, inadvertently glancing across at Iris. 'Everybody knows what I am come from, that I have grown up a rough chap, unfit for such company.'

Lady Fermor interrupted him. She had been looking him through again, and now she put her weak hand, with an imperative gesture, on his arm, as a signal to him to sit down again. 'My dear boy—you will suffer the word from an old woman,' she said, a little hoarsely—'let the matter rest. You shall never be interfered with again, though you should take it into your head to eat pulse as well as to drink water. I could have wished, for your own sake, you had not adopted this freak, for it will be against your making your way in the county, You see I speak plainly in defence of my opinions, though plenty of people will tell you they are not worth defending. But the affair is your own, as you say. If anybody is called on to apologize for getting up a row, I think I ought to figure as the guilty person. But I have lived more than eighty years a sinner instead of a saint, so what would you have?'

‘Nothing, nothing,’ he protested incoherently; ‘you can’t suppose that I want you to excuse yourself, that I did not guess you meant kindly by me, or that I sought to dictate—save the mark!—to anybody.’

‘Well, then, we’ll let the argument drop and the dinner go on in peace,’ said Lady Fermor, with the quickly restored philosophy of a once practised judge of appeal in dinner and card-table squabbles.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CARD-TABLES.

LADY FERMOR showed no diminution of favour to Sir William because of the sharp skirmish that had followed his introduction to her house. She would never have forgiven a woman for persistent opposition to her will, and the consequent outrage on conventional good manners. Lady Fermor had never either forgiven or forgotten the manner in which Iris had learnt Miss Burrage's creed and stood by it, though the grandmother had seen fit to ignore and shelve the useless struggle. She would have treated any woman's scruples with withering contempt, even though she had been forced to give way to them. But her estimate of men had always been as far apart as the poles from her judgment of women. She liked men to have wills of their own; those were rather feathers in

their caps than otherwise in her eyes. She had always granted men license. She would even permit them to be virtuous and Methodistical—was it possible for forbearance in such a woman to go farther, without detesting and despising them. And she still craved their regard for herself.

When she rose from the table she took Sir William's arm, availing herself of his support instead of her old ally's aid, or her granddaughter's shoulder, or her own stick, to help her to reach the drawing-room, where she still kept her new friend by her side. She improved on her lectures on agriculture by presenting him with sketches—pungent, though kept within bounds—drawn from her circle of neighbours.

Once Major Pollock tried to strike in with a malicious inquiry whether Sir William still interested himself in military matters. The public found men in every branch of the service favouring it with their experience nowadays. It might be worth while to get Sir William's opinion on recruits, or rations, or the like. Major Pollock felt sure it would carry weight, and would receive all the attention it deserved.

Sir William had from the first looked askance at the half-pay officer, who, by the way, had never seen more distant regimental quarters than were to be found in Ireland. The man appealed to knit his brows in perplexity and annoyance. But Lady Fermor promptly interposed, and put a stop to the cross-examination. She was more than a match for a creature like Pollock, and she would show him what he should have for his impertinence in daring to plague any person she protected.

‘We will have no shop talked here, Pollock,’ she said with grim decision. ‘Indeed, your theories must be so antiquated, and, if I am not mistaken, some of your recollections of your old regiment so disagreeable, that I recommend you not to attempt to compare notes with Sir William here or anywhere;’ a significant reminder which caused the gentleman to retreat with a scowl.

Tea and coffee were brought in. Major Pollock read the newspapers sulkily. Iris flitted like a white butterfly through the great gorgeous room.

‘Play or sing something, child,’ cried her grandmother; and then from the grand piano,

massive like the rest of the furniture, though the march of time had reached the instrument in its corner, there issued for the intruder not the bravura strains which the once strong fingers of Lady Fermor had forced from the cracking strings, but the music of the spheres wistfully rising and softly falling and dying away; songs with words and without words, by Schubert and Mendelssohn, Chopin's passionate, pathetic Polish mazurkas, quaint tender ballads by unknown singers in the far-off, misty past. He on whose ear every note thrilled, would sooner have faced the cannon's mouth hot with the death warrants of battle, than approached uninvited the girlish figure behind the heavy barricade, even though he had been freed from Lady Fermor's detention.

Though Lord Fermor could no longer take the foot of his table at dinner, he tottered into the drawing-room on the arm of his valet. The peer was a bent wreck of a man, with lack-lustre eyes, and a tongue which still wagged at intervals, no doubt, but had ceased to be under the sure control of the brain. He looked so pitiable an object, that Sir William sprang up, as if he, a young man in his

strength, were fain to salute age in its last mournful decay.

‘Come along, Fermor,’ cried Lady Fermor in what had been her view-halloo voice, ‘you are as fresh as a daisy to-night. We’ll have you following the hounds again, one of these fine days.’

‘If you say so, my lady,’ piped Lord Fermor in his thin treble, showing his toothless gums, with the ghost of a smile for the woman who had been his ruin, and was his last stay, ‘then it must be all right. But where are the card-tables?’

Cards were the sole means of excitement remaining to the couple, who had drunk other sources to their polluted dregs in their day. To do the two justice, it was more for a necessary stimulant, than from an unholy greed of gain, that Lambford had acquired its last bad name for play. Lord Fermor’s encumbered rent-roll was still more than enough for their fast diminishing expenses, and would last their time, while Iris was the only descendant of the two to profit by their acquisitions. There was an heir to the barony and entailed estate who was a nephew of the present Lord Fermor, his first wife having died childless.

But though the reigning peer and his second wife consented to accept Mr. Mildmay's tardy overtures, the master and mistress of Lambford cared nothing for their successor, naturally. They regarded him as looking out for their deaths, and taking stock of what was to come to him, every time he showed his face at his future place.

Major Pollock had thrown down his paper to be ready for action, though he received no further encouragement from his host than a peevish, scantily civil—

‘Dear me, Pollock, have you ventured out in this east wind? I rather wonder at you, but since you are here, you'll help us with some game or other.’

‘All of us have not your privileges, Lord Fermor,’ said Major Pollock dryly, ‘but it is always something to be of use.’

‘I am afraid to ask if you play cards, Sir William,’ said Lady Fermor, with the drollest suspicion of timidity, which was yet perfectly sincere, in her voice and manner, as she spoke to her next neighbour in a tone half-doubtful, half-insinuating.

‘I have played,’ he admitted, ‘but I may not know any of your games.’

‘*N’importe, mon cher*, I will teach you,’ she said gayly.

‘No, Pollock, you are to have nothing to do with the lesson,’ she interposed peremptorily, to prevent a quick movement of the Major in their direction; ‘Sir William is to be my pupil and my opponent when he has learnt his lesson, do you hear? I don’t want any interference with the course of instruction which I propose to give him.’

‘Very well, Lady Fermor, you shall make your little game,’ said Major Pollock, retreating with a shrug and the beginning of a snarl worked off by the relief of delivering an unpleasant *double entendre*, ‘I may as well take myself off, and face the east wind which has incurred Fermor’s displeasure, since I cannot even have the comfort of finding myself useful.’

‘Bosh, Pollock,’ exclaimed the old lady, who belonged to the generation of women that had taken delight in addressing men freely by their surnames. In fact she was even now dropping the formal ‘Sir William,’ and, somewhat to his surprise, calling her newest fancy, ‘Thwaite,’ as his old comrades’ wives had done. She was not out of humour. She had

just been propitiated by Sir William's concession to card-playing. She desired to make amends to her old ally. 'You are not going to set up being thin-skinned at this time of the day,' she rallied him; 'you know I don't like my lord to play without me at his elbow, since he is not equal to too much excitement, and wants me to keep him in order, don't you, Fermor? But there, you may tackle him to-night, and Iris will help him with his cards.'

'Thanks,' said Major Pollock. 'It will be an unequal match; I shall have to put forth all my skill against the combined forces of Lord Fermor and Miss Compton. Besides, don't you think'—he passed behind her chair and dropped the words into her ear—'it is late in the day for me to begin to play the parts of dry nurse and keeper?'

She frowned with rising wrath, but she shook her fan at him the next moment, 'You are a queer creature. You have gone on finding fault with the side on which your bread was buttered, ever since I have known you, and as that is neither to-day nor yesterday, I fancy I must put up with you to the end.'

Sir William ran the most imminent risk of convincing Lady Fermor, against her will, that he was a blockhead of the first water, for the same couple that had threatened to play ducks and drakes with his powers of attention and response during dinner, formed part of a trio, with only two little tables between him and them. Major Pollock, whose sight was failing, sat turned to one side in order to catch the full light from the lamp on its stand just behind him. He did not serve as a screen to shut out the view of Miss Compton and her grandfather from the furtive gazer. Dewy youth and decrepit age sat side by side, as Iris marshalled her grandfather's cards, put them into his fumbling hands to play out in their order, and marked his numbers for him. She devoted all her care to Lord Fermor, as if she would look as little as possible at their antagonist.

Major Pollock did not play with the scornful, reckless indifference that he might not have taken the trouble to conceal, had there not been golden stakes on which his eyes gloated; for he was a broken-down gentleman, up to the neck in difficulties as everybody knew. But Iris did not wish him to have her grand-

father's money. Major Pollock made her very angry by the want of feeling and reverence with which he took off, every now and then, the scarcely conscious old man's pitiable weaknesses, turning them almost openly into merciless ridicule. She believed he dared not have done it, if Lady Fermor had been disengaged enough to see what he was about, but he dared to do it before her—Iris, in mean revenge for being set down to play this poor little game of bezique instead of being allowed to play a higher game.

As a rule, Iris was not called on to assist at any of the Lambford card-tables unless when her grandfather and grandmother were alone, when they strictly limited their necessarily tame diversion to taking from Peter to give to Paul. It was the first battle she had fought on her own—that is on her grandfather's account—against an unscrupulous adversary. She regarded the field as unworthy, but she stood by her guns and showed no want of courage and determination. Young as she was, the protective instinct was already strong in her. All that Sir William understood of the pantomime, was that Iris's little face was flushed, and her lovely bow of a mouth

straightened and compressed. If he could only have seen beneath the soft, fine rings curling like a child's hair on her forehead, he would have discovered that the big brow which ought to have been smooth as ivory, was ruffled and rumped with intentness and vexation.

The young man could not imagine that the girl cared any more than he did for the little heap of sovereigns with which, at Lady Fermor's suggestion, he and she had also adorned their table. Any former experience he had enjoyed in this line, had been in trials of chance of a nature little better than pitch-and-toss, and in betting on such races as some of his officers had managed to get up even in India. His losses had never been so deadly as to imbue either him or Jen with a horror of the propensity. But he could see that Miss Compton had enough to try her, for not merely was her grandfather inclined to be aimlessly restive and to remonstrate without any distinct notion of what he objected to, with regard to every card she sought out, and number she marked between the deals, Lord Fermor's clouded memory invariably reverted to an awkward subject of inquiry. 'Who is the

youngster playing with your grandmother, girl?' he demanded irritably, over and over again. He spoke as if the knowledge had been wilfully and injuriously withheld from him, and Iris had to hasten to reply in a succession of explanations delivered, with regard to Lord Fermor's deafness, in full ear-shot of the object of his curiosity. She bit her lips, and looked in an opposite direction, as she kept saying every time, 'It is Sir William Thwaite, grandpapa.'

'And who the mischief is Sir William Thwaite? never heard of him in all my days,' grumbled the insatiable questioner.

'Oh, Sir William who has succeeded old Sir John, and has lately come to Whitehills.'

'What! Is Sir John dead? Why have I never heard of it? Who the dickens will go next, I wonder?'

She would not laugh, because Major Pollock was grinning maliciously without scruple or disguise. And if that grin were observed, either by Lord Fermor or Sir William, it might be enough to exasperate the innocent offender into a frenzy, or to cover the still more innocent victim with confusion of face, without her conspiring to increase the misfortune. She

bore the assaults on her patience and temper wonderfully, but at last her girlish gravity gave way; yet even in yielding to the irresistible provocation, she did not join in Major Pollock's laugh. She looked across with half-shy frankness and laughed a deprecating appeal to Sir William, who coloured to the roots of his hair as he smiled slowly back to her. She was like an angel, Sir William vowed, with a swelling heart, and he was inspired and emboldened to take a step on which he would not have ventured earlier. When the game was finished and everybody rose, he happened to be standing near Iris for a moment. In that moment he had 'the impudence,' as he called it afterwards, to speak to her for a second time aside, to beg her pardon specially.

'I am sorry for what took place during dinner,' he muttered. 'Lady Fermor has been good enough to look over it, but I behaved like a sulky brute.'

She glanced up at him with a light kindling in her hazel eyes, her face grew grave, but it was very gentle and sweet in its womanly gravity. She spoke with generous impulsiveness, 'Don't apologise, I am sure you did quite right.'

The Greek Iris was said to cut the last strand of human destiny, to refresh the parched earth by pouring down rivers of waters from the lowering clouds, and then to glorify them with all the colours of the rainbow. But this English Iris unwittingly knotted instead of cutting a terrible tangle in a poor mortal's career, poured out the beginning of a flood of trouble and sorrow on his devoted head, and then shone above him in incomparable radiance, as if that could have brought any balm to his woes.

CHAPTER X.

LADY FERMOR'S NEIGHBOURLY WAYS.

THE squires of Eastham did their part by Sir William Thwaite. They all paid their respects to him and held out the right hand of fellowship to him, declaring that he was not nearly so bad as they had expected, and that now he was 'Sir William and all that,' the past had better be forgotten and he should be treated as if he had been born, cradled, and schooled in the purple. It would be hard to say exactly what the squires had expected, or what they thought of themselves. Some of them were clownish enough to this day, and not without wild ways of their own in their out-of-the-way retreats, though they had worn pink coats, sworn over grouse, handled old plate, swaggered in dining-rooms and dozed in drawing-rooms, ever since the middle-aged men were boys.

But of Sir William's fellow-squires and nearest neighbours, every one was too old to be a natural companion for him. The way of the modern world and the poverty of Eastham rendered it impossible that the county should support a population of young men of the higher rank. These lads, including the heirs of estates, were all drafted off betimes into regiments or ships, to eat their dinners in the Temple, to wear white surplices and be petted or pitied as curates, even to figure in the upper walks of trade in the larger mercantile towns, or to make shift in the colonies. The absentees who could turn up at set seasons only fluttered home like the birds the young men came to shoot in September, or, like the children and schoolboys at Christmas, or on any private emergency, or demonstration in the visitors' respective families. What remained permanently was a small residue of half-pacers, pretenders to a better position than they were entitled to, scampish young fellows of whom nothing could be made, who took their cue from Major Pollock when they were within hail of Knotley. Some of these promising young people were supposed to be trying better class farming or brewing, since

there was a great brewery in Knotley, while they plagued the hearts out of their unfortunate parents or all who were responsible for the delinquents.

With both the old and the young sets representing the squirearchy, Sir William Thwaite's total abstinence, in drinking only water or tea, was, as Lady Fermor had easily prognosticated, a great stumbling-block to familiar intercourse and social intimacy. A rumour spread abroad that Sir William had made a vulgar clamour in refusing to drink wine at Lady Fermor's table, where the choicest vintages had been wont to flow in bucketfuls. Lady Fermor had condoned the offence for her own ends, but her neighbours, who might not have the same inducement, did not feel inclined to excuse the outrage. The most sober of the elder men did not scruple to declare that total abstinence was suspicious and ominous, not to say bad form. The fellow must have suffered from D.T. Depend upon it there would be reaction and an outbreak sooner or later. There was nothing like moderation in all things. The young men in great disgust voted Sir William at once a low prig, a dissenting minister in

disguise, a wet blanket, a beastly interloper. The favour of the last-mentioned critics would not have been particularly desirable for the man whom they sent to Coventry. Poor Jen's prevision was prophetic where they were concerned.

But Sir William was lonely in his new estate, and he would have been still lonelier had not Lady Fermor proved faithful to her fancy and approached him as she knew how, in a variety of neighbourly ways. He had touched some softer chord in the hard, cynical old heart. Whether he recalled an honest young brother who had believed in her when she was still deserving of belief, with whom she had been hand and glove in her early girlhood, or a lover for whom she had felt the dawning of fervent respect and regard, though she had tortured and tried him, till for his honour and happiness he had parted from her for ever, or the boy she might have borne instead of weak and whimpering girls, who could perhaps have saved her from the depths which had left her what she was; there was no question of the kindly feeling for Sir William which underlay the mocking defiance of the neighbourhood, her determination to ap-

propriate the new-comer, and the rapid formation in her mind of certain worldly schemes where he was concerned.

Lady Fermor kept up briskly the acquaintance which had been begun. She invited Sir William constantly over to Lambford and she returned his visits by unceremonious calls, to ask what he was doing, what he thought of the weather for the turnips, whether his lambs were in good condition. She would disturb the absolute silence of the long low-roofed drawing-room, out of which Lady Thwaite had been wont to allow complacently so much could be made in this age of revivals. It was such a delicious place for window-seats, screens, fans and pot-pourri. As it was now stripped of Lady Thwaite's reversion of the screens, fans and pot-pourri, and under the superintendence of an unexceptionable housekeeper like Mrs. Cray, who hated what she termed litter, the room was quickly assuming a stiff, stony and disused aspect. But it did not chill or daunt Lady Fermor, who claimed her afternoon tea there and looked round her on the family portraits which were heir-looms, the couple of Sir Joshuas, the fine fragments of old tapestry, with a freedom which even she

had not attempted when the room owned a mistress.

Lady Fermor declared without a falter, rather with sly satisfaction, that she was a great deal too old for people to speak about her any longer, or to mind what she did, so that she could drop in on a young friend to see what he was about without making a rumpus. She never took her grand-daughter with her, on her 'larking expeditions,' but Sir William was in Iris Compton's company every time he went over to Lambford. He accepted the invitations. Mr. Miles's early warning proved of no avail. Will Thwaite had not been so nice in the company he had kept that he should consider himself too good for these people, one of whom was the sweetest and truest of God's creatures. So long as he did not fail in his promise to Jen, he did not see what harm could come of his going where he was made heartily welcome. He thought more of that after the first visit than of the rank of Lord and Lady Fermor or the grandeur of Lambford.

Sir William did not mind losing a little money; he supposed it was the way of such houses, and he could afford it. For that

matter, Lady Fermor had interposed her shield, from the first evening on which Sir William had gone to Lambford, between him and wholesale plunder, as represented by Major Pollock and birds of his feather. She kept her young neighbour very much to herself, either as her antagonist or her partner at the card-table. She would consent to amuse herself by winning more or less of his guineas; but so long as she could help it there should be no turning inside-out of his pockets, no inoculating him with the incurable disease of play, no instilling into him the arts of a blackleg in self-defence. One lad who had trusted her should not have to curse the day he had ever seen her face. He should come and go at Lambford without his being the worse for it, even if his being the worse were not likely to interfere with a half-formed plan of hers.

Yet Sir William did not respond to Lady Fermor's friendship without some instinctive reluctance. Whatever his youthful errors had been, his better nature was repelled by her, as by an old woman who was very far from what she should be. In spite of her gradual social whitewashing, she occasionally made revela-

tions of herself which revolted him. He resented her lack of affection for her granddaughter, which he had been quick to notice, and felt aggrieved by it, though it was no business of his, and so far as he could judge, the indifference remained unmixed with any form of ill-usage. But it also belonged to his nature, both in its strength and its weakness, that he should be touched by any kindness shown to himself. Lady Fermor, be she what she might, was awfully good to him, and one day finding her alone among the tulip beds on the terrace at Lambford, tottering along by the help of her parasol, he was moved to an impulsive offer of his strong young arm, the first he had made to a lady in his life.

‘Won’t you lean on my arm, my lady?’ he said, awkwardly enough, ‘if it ain’t too great a freedom in me to propose it.’

She took his arm instantly, and patted it with her claw of a hand, as she chatted to him.

Another day he was shown into the back drawing-room by a bungle of the servant’s; Sir William immediately concluded—when he found Lady Fermor almost swallowed up in wraps, in an easy-chair, with one foot swathed

as in the cerements of a mummy on a stool before her—in the clutches of gout. He stopped on the threshold with a brief word of apology and regret, and was about to beat a rapid retreat when the sufferer hailed him.

‘Don’t go away, Thwaite,’ she forbade him. ‘Come forward, and let me see a hale and hearty fellow who has all his senses, and is neither worn out, nor deaf, nor blind—even Pollock has to use glasses in private, though the fool goes blinking without them in public. You have not had a twinge of my enemy. Ah, your day will come. Well, perhaps not, if you go on drinking ditch water; but I dare say worse will happen to you. Sit down and tell me what news is going, or read the papers to me for a bit. I am sick of that hole of a dressing-room of mine, to which I have been confined for three days. I dare say I shall die some day without my friends having had the grace to inquire for me. No; I know you had not heard, but whose fault was that? Now that you are here I am going to make you useful. See, there is a draught blowing from that window, draw the curtains more to my side.’

He did as he was told, handily enough this

time. He was one of those rough fellows who are gentle in sick-rooms. Indeed, he had a greater knack at nursing even than Iris Compton possessed. This gift had become known both in and out of hospital in the course of his soldiering. He had been repeatedly told off as the orderly appointed to wait on a sick comrade or officer. But he had certainly never waited on an old lady under an attack of gout before. 'Mais ce n'est que le premier pas qui coute.' When he turned and saw better the hollow eyes glittering with fever and pain, the puckered, yellow face, the constrained attitude, the helplessness, he was full of pity, and of a craving to be of service to her.

'It ain't a joke. Have you had your medicine? Don't it ease you the least thing? No; I am main sorry. I think, if you would let me, I could lift you right up and set you down again more comfortable like.'

'Ah! thank you, my dear fellow, that is ever so much better. I am in the very best corner of purgatory now. How long would it have been before any idiot of a servant or a doctor could have managed it? Of course a well-meaning baby like Iris would only kill

herself without being of an atom of use to me. There, will you read to me? for the truth is I am not up to talking. You'll find some of the morning papers on that table.'

He fell into the trap, if trap it was, instantly. He brought the paper, and read fluently in a stentorian but perfectly distinct voice, which had lost its self-consciousness for the moment. He picked out carefully the paragraphs relating to races far and near, and the last report of the *Mark Lane Express*. Then he courageously attacked the columns that set forth a trial for murder. He was satisfied that these were the portions of the paper in which she would take most interest.

Sir William read till Lady Fermor, growing drowsy, dismissed him with thanks and praise.

'I don't know what I owe to you, since you are sending me off to sleep, which is the very best thing you could have done for me—what Sawbones has tried in vain to bring about with his abominable opiates. You have read what any rational, unaffected person would like to listen to, and I have heard every word you said, for you don't cheep like a girl or mouth like a play-actor.'

The last hit was directed against Mr. Acton, the rector, who, in seeking zealously to be eyes to his discreditable old parishioner, had neither succeeded in affording pleasure nor conveying profit.

But to-day Lady Fermor's heavy eyes were moist as they glanced after her nurse and reader. She was a good deal of a Stoic, and wished to feel sufficient for herself, but it was so long, so very long, since she had been served with any service she cared to accept out of pure, disinterested goodwill, with some kindly care for her at the bottom of the act.

CHAPTER XI.

RIVAL CLAIMS.

LADY THWAITE soon became aware of the degree to which Lady Fermor had diverted Sir William from what, after Lady Thwaite's advances, ought to have been his grateful, trustful reliance on the only person near, who had the most distant pretension to being connected with him by a family tie. The absence of any natural Netherton influence over him, and the fact that he could not find anything in common with the late Sir John's widow, were disappointing traits in Sir William. The conclusion might have been held a compliment to her ladyship, still it was a piece of great stupidity in the young man, since Lady Thwaite was so popular in the neighbourhood. She was not bluer or more æsthetical than the custom of the day required. She was not stuck up or puritanical. She was a woman

of society, a charming woman in most people's estimation, the secret of whose charm was that she could suit herself admirably to any commonplace, tolerable company, in her own class of course.

The cool appropriation of Sir William by Lady Fermor was a lawless interference with the rights of another, and an arrogant trampling upon them which savoured of the woman's old machinations. But Lady Thwaite, though she had all her life shown that she could look out for herself, was no match for her neighbour, and knew it, which was a considerable proof of Lady Thwaite's cleverness. She felt provoked and aggrieved, but she did not dream of entering the lists against the successful competitor. If Sir William Thwaite had the bad taste and the bad moral perception—and after all, what could be expected from him?—to accept Lady Fermor for his sponsor, and to turn to Lambford for countenance and guidance, unquestionably he was at liberty to do so. The loss of frequent personal visits from him would simply be a relief from maintaining fellowship with a boor and a bore, from the responsibility of inflicting him on her friends, and from being, in a sense, security for his

good behaviour. Thanks to her mother's lawyer and the late Sir John, his widow was not by any means dependent on the favour of his successor, though she would have liked to have done her duty by him and by the fine old place over which she had presided, which she had once hoped would have descended to her son. But if Sir William showed himself incapable of appreciating her motives and was infatuated, there remained nothing more to be said.

Lady Thwaite in her calmness and reasonableness was, as Mr. Miles had vouched for, not at all difficult to get on with, up to a certain point, and if you expected nothing farther, you would not be disappointed. She had at once suspected Lady Fermor of ulterior designs. 'Trust the naughty old woman not to do anything without having a sufficiently selfish end to serve,' said Lady Thwaite to herself. The preponderance of a certain quantity of brain over heart in her, prevented her from so much as conceiving the lingering womanly regard with which Sir William had inspired his undesirable monitor. 'What is it?' pondered Lady Thwaite. 'Does she want a fit victim for the intermittent gambling

that still goes on fitfully at Lambford? I know I—who make a rule of never staking anything save gloves—was forced into losing three guineas the last time I dined there. I did wish I had paid heed to poor Sir John, and kept clear even of *ci-devant* black sheep, or that I could have pled, like demure Mrs. Acton, that the Rector would not permit me to play for money. Is Lady Fermor bent on making a match between Sir William and Iris Compton? I did think, when they met here, that if it had been anybody else I should have said she seized the first opportunity of taking his homely measure and laying herself out for him. He is a good-looking fellow enough, and might pass for horsey and nothing worse, though I believe he enlisted in an infantry regiment. He knows how to hold his tongue in the meantime, and when he reaches the stage of speaking, very likely he will do it decently. Whitehills is not to be despised, even with a Sir Will attached to it, as a necessary though not very available appendage. But Iris is not a girl of that sort, not that there would be any harm in her seeking to push her fortune, if there were any call for it, or if her destiny were in her own

keeping. Women of the upper classes have no other resource, unless they take to mounting platforms. But Iris Compton has birth, beauty, and if her grandfather and grandmother live to nearly a hundred, as *mauvais sujets* usually do, I dare say she will have something like a fortune. But there are the ugly antecedents, with what may be the taint in the blood. No ; many a man would not choose her for his wife, poor girl ! so that my dearly beloved and right worshipful cousin, Sir William, might have a chance. He had the taste to make sheep's eyes at her, as at a divinity, the other day. I wonder how it would do ! Iris would be a great improvement for a cousin, and she would not rule with a high hand. She is the style of grand simpleton who would never forget old favours and former conditions—for instance, that I had been kind to her, and had been mistress of Whitehills in my day. How does it feel to be Queen Dowager or ex-Lady Mayoress, I should like to know ? That has not come quite within my experience yet, since my dear old drawing-room is given over to Mrs. Cray, and no other Lady Thwaite reigns at Whitehills. I should say it depended to some

extent for its being made tolerably endurable, on the temper of the reigning Queen-Consort or Lady Mayoress. Ah! but nice as she is, there is *that* in the blood, while the association might prove a fearful risk in its utter unsuitability. Beauty and the Beast, the Princess and—not the knightly Page—the ploughman Squire.’

After further thinking over the subject, Lady Thwaite saw herself called upon to attempt a talk with Sir William. She would drop a gentle hint—double-barrelled—against the danger of houses—of which Lambford was not the only one in Eastham—in which play was as an essential element, and against the rashness of marriages which involved bad connections.

Lady Thwaite sent Sir William one of her little notes, summoning him—with the most disarming, compelling confidence in his obeying the summons—to come over to Netherton either for luncheon, afternoon-tea, or dinner, as he felt inclined, to discuss a tenant difficulty with regard to one of the farms set apart for her jointure, about which, by the way, she was a hundred times better informed than he could be. ‘Men like to be consulted whether

they know or not,' she reasoned. 'Poor Sir John always did. It used to put him into a good humour, and the less he knew, the better he was pleased. I am right to begin by asking Sir William's opinion, and young Sam Withers's views about a new lease will do as well as any other subject.'

Out of three evils Sir William chose the least, the slight refec-tion which ladies affect as afternoon-tea. Though he never drank tea then, for his own part, it was not such a novelty to him, as many another thing. His sister Jen, the washerwoman, and her cronies, had taken tea at all hours! Here was the touch of nature which seemed to make the whole of women kin. Besides, he had been fortunate before on such an occasion. Who knew what graceful figure might not pass the windows, what flower-face blossom before his ravished eyes, what eager, gentle interposition save him from a horrible strait? He had not forgotten the burden which included agonies of *mauvaise honte*, the mingled stupefaction and smart of a consciousness of unbounded ignorance, the dread of looking like a cad, with the angry suspicion, bordering on conviction, that the late Sir John's widow did

not find her own house an insuperable barrier against making game of her husband's heir?

But unless for the pleasure of being helped by Iris, Sir William was becoming more independent of extraneous aid in his new sphere.

It is a curious study both for philosophy and satire, to recognise how soon a man of ordinary aptitude and fair opportunities accommodates himself outwardly to a change of circumstances. There may be a thousand things, *petits soins* of etiquette, tricks, turns and shades of behaviour which take years, nay generations to acquire, which, when all is said, women learn sooner and better than men. But it would have been either encouraging or mortifying, according to the creed or temper of the individual, for an onlooker to have satisfied himself of the degree to which Sir William had accustomed himself, on the surface at least, within three or four months, to a new style of living. He now sat, or leant back, very much at his ease apparently, in one of Lady Thwaite's fauteuils, and looked round with calmly observant—she could almost have said critical eyes, on her

treasures, the orchids from his own green-houses, the Banksia rose-tree covering the door of the conservatory with its myriads of minute flowers. But she did not have him there that she might privately remark on the improvement in his manner and bearing, which, save for his soldierly carriage, owed little or nothing to his training. The only sign she gave of noticing his progress, was that the faultlessly well-bred widow, in her faultless weeds, did not again break down by committing the solecism of converting her guest and kinsman into a butt.

Lady Thwaite discussed fluently the grievance of young Sam Withers's wishing a new lease to his farm already, and settled the question without much help from Sir William, whose one idea, as yet, in such difficulties was Mr. Miles. Then she glided on to general topics, chatting easily and brightly. There was not much going on in the neighbourhood just then—there was not much at any time. Eastham was a little slow, even those who loved it best—and she hoped Sir William would grow fond of his county—must own that. But it would have been a blessing if the quality of slowness had been the only old

fashion to be deprecated which still held its own in Eastham. Was Sir William aware that a considerable—she might say a lamentable—amount of high play survived in every class, with the most distressing results in some cases? The Rector could tell him tales of its demoralising effect on many of the farmers. She trusted Sir William as a new-comer would set his face against the practice, when he met it in their circle.

Sir William in his gravity was not without a sense of humour, and now that he was beginning to get over the shocks he had sustained, the humour had room to play at times.

‘I beg your pardon, Lady Thwaite, I think it is just because I am a new-comer that it is not for me to interfere ; now, you are an old hand——’

‘An old hand!’ she swallowed the brutal plain speaking. ‘I would gladly try the little I can, but except abroad a woman has nothing to do with play.’

Poor Lady Thwaite! she was an innocent woman dwelling among green fields after all. She had little suspicion of the re-appearance of the mortal malady among the grand dames

of the generation. Such a relapse consummates the ruin of old historical families, brings to the hammer broad acres, and scatters art collections which have taken centuries to acquire, and have been kept together through changes of dynasties and national up-heavals, to be gambled away by the turning up of a knave or the loss of an ace.

‘It is a vice,’ continued Lady Thwaite in her simplicity, ‘which you men keep very much to yourselves in England. But Lady Fermor is an exception. Is it not a melancholy spectacle to see a poor old creature like Lord Fermor, and a battered, bedizened old woman like Lady Fermor — they say she came out at Almack’s — cling to cards as their chief good, when one would think the couple might be turning their attention to other things?’

‘To their graves or their winding sheets, I suppose?’ Sir William rose to irony. ‘I thought the Fermors were your friends,’ he said, repeating the objection he had made to Mr. Miles’s opinion, as if the higher Sir William rose in the world the more social hypocrisy he encountered. ‘They can take their

choice, I fancy. If they are too stiff to walk or ride, and can't see to read, and are not able to entertain their friends in any other way, ain't cards made for them, and the like of them, to pass some of their slow creeping time?'

She hastened to explain herself. 'I quite agree with you that cards, or backgammon, or chess, in moderation, are excellent resources for old people, especially if they are deaf. Don't imagine for a moment that I am so narrow or silly as to object to cards in themselves. Why, I used to play draughts with Sir John as regularly as the evenings came round. It is perfectly depressing to come across the board now. But it was play for high stakes according to people's means, that I was deploring. If that has ceased at Lambford it can only be lately. Oh! Lady Fermor has been a dreadful woman,' exclaimed Lady Thwaite, as if on the impulse of the moment, shading her face with a fan which lay at hand. 'One cannot speak of such things, unless when an old married woman, as you rightly regard me, opens her mouth to put a stranger and kinsman on his guard. There is no end of skeletons in that house—very grisly skeletons.

The first Lady Fermor died mad. A visitor staying in the house locked his room door and shot himself, after quitting the card-table. He was a young man engaged to be married; the only son of a widow, and he was a clergyman—I am sorry to say, when he yielded to the madness and could not face the disgrace and destruction in store for him. Poor Iris Compton! it is very sad for her, but although she is a charming girl, as good as gold, and all the horrors happened before she was born, still the reproach attaches in some measure to her—a portion of the shadow falls on her. It is grievous, but it cannot be helped.'

It was a rainy afternoon in May, and he had been sitting with his long legs and his boots—not free from mud—stretched out before him, while he glanced out of the window nearest to him with a mind half-wandering from the conversation, because of her he might see among the laurels, in spite of the rain which had only begun to fall. He drew himself up with a suddenness that made Lady Thwaite start, and turned upon her a lowering brow and a hot cheek. He was unused to any diplomacy in conversation; he only knew that he hated to have his friends called bad names—all the

more, perhaps, if they deserved them. But it made him furious to listen to the most distant insinuation of a stain on the spotless plumage of a white dove like Miss Compton.

‘I have found Lambford a jolly house,’ he declared defiantly. ‘Old Lady Fermor behaves like a mother to me. Why do you smile and shake your head? I am sure she is old enough to be my grandmother.’ At that word, which slipped out inadvertently, he coloured more violently than before, and began to flounder in his speech. ‘You don’t mean me to rake up old scandals, and to distrust everybody who speaks me fair and makes me welcome, because they have not always been on the square. I am not their judge; I have sins enough of my own to answer for—if you only knew. As for Miss Compton, I will not speak of her; she is not to be brought into such talk, only she is as much beyond reproach as the stars in the sky. Good-bye, Lady Thwaite. Oh! dash it now, I am not displeased. What right has a fellow like me to be displeased or to object to any word which a woman—a lady—likes to say of her friends in her own drawing-room?’ and out he marched.

She rose, went to a window, and stood look-

ing after him as he walked fast across the sweep and down the little avenue. She laughed a little at her own dismissal. ‘Yes, he has dismissed me; I have not sent him away. He might have taken an umbrella; but I suppose he has stood sentinel in the wet like the man in Tennyson’s verses. It is a plain-spoken Sir Will; yet I am not sure that he saw my drift. It is evident he is hit by Iris Compton. He has not the self-control or delicacy to maintain a becoming reserve, not to say to throw dust into people’s eyes. If the old witch at Lambford does incline in that direction, I dare say the match is made. Poor Iris! she will have many a yawn and many a blush—though she has been accustomed to a dead-alive household—to submit, and to look aside when she cannot look straight before her. She will not have everything her own way—when all is done, in spite of his present blustering worship. I could imagine that a hero from the ranks would have a primitively passionate courtship while it lasted—to be followed by a reaction of coolness, neglect, and rudeness, even when he did not beat his wife like a coal-heaver. Now Sir John was calm and deliberate in his well-bred wariness; one

always knew what to do with him. He did not change much, though he could be cantankerous at times, poor old soul! I don't know—she may be good enough to stand it all, and bear with him while she is making as much of a gentleman as can be made of him.

‘If he is to marry somebody soon,’ Lady Thwaite cogitated further, ‘I would rather a great deal have Iris than any of the Acton girls—only Lucy is old enough, the others are too young, and Lucy has not a soul above choir practising, Sunday-school teaching, and poor people's clubs — an excellent eldest daughter or wife for a clergyman, but not a wife for a squire. She would have neither time nor tact for taking the lead in county society, and she might drive the Squire to become dissenter or the worst of landlords, out of pure contradiction. Such things are heard of nowadays, noblemen holding forth at conventicles, and squires declining to interfere between farmers and labourers, and refusing to put another foot in the village, where their wives are for ever pottering and making paupers.

‘Maudie and Nanny Hollis might have the monster for a trick on their brothers, or a

wager; but that would not do at any price,' Lady Thwaite pursued her musings. 'If an alliance be unmistakably impending, I shall throw my weight, such as it is, into Iris Compton's scale. I suppose she would go up to town for her trousseau. I might chaperon her *faute de mieux*, if Lady Fermor did not choose to accompany her grand-daughter. The old lady will not give in; but she cannot attempt many more journeys. I should not dislike it. Iris would have to make Sir William do a good deal of re-furnishing, and I should be the best qualified person to advise the couple.

'There! I believe Lady Fermor has infected me or suborned me,' the schemer ended. 'I could not have believed that I should be so easily reconciled—not to say that I should take kindly to Sir William's marriage—to another Lady Thwaite at Whitehills. Heigho! But it is natural that I should continue to take an interest in my old belongings; at the same time he and she ought to be much obliged to me, as I don't doubt they will be. If my poor boy had lived, the place would never have gone entirely away from me; I should have been living over there still, till he was of age,

and it was his marriage which had to be planned. Oh, my little baby!' cried the woman, with a momentary softening, 'I thought for a brief, blessed time that you would grow up like other babies—that we should make a man of you. But it was not to be, and there is an end of it. Where is the use of idle lamentation? The Rector would say it is as unchristian as it is unwise.'

Lady Fermor had often astonished—nay, astounded—the world, and she was to astonish it again, by boldly proclaiming that she was to return to it for one night. She would not put herself about to go up to town during the season, while she must have Iris presented next year; but she would have gay doings once more at Lambford—unexceptionably gay doings this time, though she did not supply the qualification. Her grand-daughter would be twenty-one in June, and Lady Fermor would have a ball in honour of Iris's birthday. There would not be a multitude—nothing like the festivities when she and Lord Fermor kept open house for a week at a time in a close run at an election, or when the hounds hunted five times in succession at the different fox-covers within twenty miles round

to oblige the Duke, who was staying at Woolaston Lodge. Tom Mildmay, Lord Fermor's nephew, would be down about that date to look around him, curry favour with the steward, lounge through the offices, and take solitary rides over the property, pricking his long ears all the time. They would see whether his wife could find an excuse for not accompanying him on this occasion. Lucy Acton would be at Iris's beck, as was her duty, and the younger girls could come, if they were required. She might count on the Hollis girls, who were never behind when any diversion, within the scope of girls, was in the wind. That meant also their father and mother. Were not those she had mentioned women enough? Very well, Lady Thwaite was to have her house full in June, and she would bring further contributions, if more partners were wanted. Leave the men to Lady Fermor; she could undertake for them, since Fermor was *hors de combat*. There would be Thwaite first—the ball was as much to introduce him as Iris—Lady Fermor said, with full comprehension of the sense in which the words might be taken, looking her hearers full in the face while she spoke. Any men

Tom Mildmay might like to bring down—they would not be much worth, still they would be men—old Hollis and the train of fellows his girls kept at their heels, the officers from Birkett—they were a new set, but every man would jump at his card. Ludovic Acton need hardly be counted; but since he had been blown up by torpedoes he might come, and old Pollock must not be left out.

Nobody was more taken by surprise at the compliment paid to her than Iris. It was an acceptable compliment to a healthy-minded young girl, leading a singularly retired life; but any exultation she was tempted to feel became a good deal subdued after a comment of her grandmother's. It followed on Iris's expression of grateful thanks, and concern lest her grandfather and grandmother should suffer from the disturbance of their usual habits, 'Though you and I don't pull in the same boat, Iris,' said the old lady with her hardest look and tone, 'you have not given me any particular reason hitherto to think you a liar. But don't make pretences that I cannot take in. No girl that ever was born would heed the comfort of Noah and his wife when her first ball at home was mooted.

Make the most of your youth and what good looks have fallen to your share, and any other good thing that comes in your way, while they last. Be sure they will not last long, and that you will have a price to pay for them. But leave me to take care of myself and my lord. I am still fit for that and more. Pray don't waste your compassion upon us. I for one should hate it, and I think I can answer for Fermor.'

Did the reader ever receive a welcome gift and a slap in the face—figuratively—from the giver at one and the same time? The process is not pleasant, especially to a sensitive, affectionate nature, and goes a long way to spoiling the gift, only, happily, custom blunts pain, and youth is elastic.

Lady Fermor chose that she should be the person to apprise Sir William of her project, making him one of her first confidants. When he received it doubtfully, rather hanging back from the promised boon than jumping at it, as she had described the action of the jubilant officers over at Birkett, she took him in hand, and pursued him with her design on his company. She had a number of *tête-à-têtes* with him on his resolution to oblige or dis-

oblige her. These *tête-à-têtes* waxed positively mysterious to the on-lookers—of whom Major Pollock sneered the ugliest sneers, and Iris smiled without a grain of anxiety because of her grandmother's great fancy for poor, rude, sober, agitated Sir William.

Sir William's agitation increased under the pressure put upon him, and the notions deliberately and persistently introduced into a mind which, though very far from weak, was at its best single rather than subtle, and was narrowed by defects of education and absence of experience. His assailant, on the contrary, was as rich in the experience that served her purpose as she was destitute of misgivings and scruples.

Sir William, still drinking water, grew practically an intoxicated man, dazed, to begin with, in his intoxication, but at every moment liable to a violent outbreak of his disordered faculties. It was at this point that he started for London with the acknowledged intention of spending three or four weeks there; but he was pledged to return to Whitehills at the end of June, in time for Lady Fermor's ball.

Any one interested in the manœuvre could detect that Sir William went with Lady

Fermor's permission, if not at her instigation. The last conclusion was the more likely, since she had been heard to dwell with some testiness on the stupidity of lawyers, even those in greatest repute, and their common failure in securing for clients the very advantages of which they stood most in need, which would be really available to them.

But what did Lady Fermor send Sir William to London for? Did she wish her protege to revisit some of her old haunts, and bring her back the last news? Did she fancy that knowledge of life and the world, the seamy side of life and the world of evil, so often taken to represent true life and the true world, especially where men are concerned, was imperatively called for to finish Sir William Thwaite's halting education? Greenhorns of young squires were wont to be sent up from the country to have their eyes opened, and learn how few people they could trust, and what a 'precious difficult' task it was to take care of themselves. It was a base kind of euphrasy which was squeezed on their eye-lids. When the young squires returned to their native fields, over head and ears in debt, wasted with riotous living, it was often doubtful—however

knowing the men showed themselves in the future—whether the game were worth the candle. Were such places of resort as Lady Fermor was likely to recommend, with the questionable introductions which she could procure, together with rides in the park, and visits to Lord's, and running the risk of being black-balled by a West-end club, judged the proper materials for lending a speedy polish to Sir William's original style? Did Lady Fermor's intention of bestowing her granddaughter on the gentleman induce her to intrust him, of all people, with the delicate responsibility of buying a birthday *cadeau* for the heroine of the ball? Left to such taste and judgment what might it not be? A hideously set necklace, fit for a South Sea Islander; a brooch and ear-rings as big as a plate and a pair of cups and saucers; a new watch, which could be worn by an alderman?

CHAPTER XII.

A HAND IN NEED.

THE simple truth was that Lady Fermor had counselled Sir William to run up in a hurry to London, and, though it was the season, to live as quietly as he could manage it, not even calling at Messrs. Miles and Dickinson's office, unless he felt bound to do so, for he would have little enough time for the business he had in hand, which was to take private lessons from a dancing master. Lady Fermor would furnish him, by the aid of a friend, with the address of the best man for his purpose. While he was about it, he might as well go to a riding master and get a little training from him also. With regard to the last obligation, Sir William had the liking for a horse which reigns in the bosom of ninety-nine out of a hundred young men. Sir John, as a matter of course, had kept up a good stud at

Whitehills long after he was incapable of taking exercise on his cob, or having anything farther to do with horses than being driven out for a carriage airing. It had been one of the first of his possessions of which Sir William availed himself, and to the credit of his courage and natuaal instincts, he had neither come to serious grief nor made a notorious spectacle of himself. His seat and hand might not be all that could be desired; there might be traces of swallowing a ramrod in the saddle as elsewhere; still Sir William did not look amiss on horseback, while his attainments in this respect were deserving of cultivation.

There is no one to tell what heart Sir William carried to his studies in the freshness of early summer in London. Whether he did not attack the first, mostly with spasms of shamefacedness and self-ridicule? Whether he were not often tempted to abandon it, and find manlier and nobler teaching in that great, wonderful world of stone and lime, which he had not known hitherto, except in the most cursory, one-sided fashion?

Only this is certain, that a strong, sweet inducement was beckoning him on to submit to what was like the binding and teasing of

Samson by Delilah, after she had subdued the giant with the spell which he himself had put into her hands.

At the same time absence and leisure for reflection, since he was not capering in one fashion or another all day, and all night to boot, did something to dispel the fumes of the intoxication, under the influence of which Sir William had rushed off to town. He was further smitten by the thought of 'swells' to the manner born, who did not need this, to him, humiliating preparation for entering into the gay society in which Iris Compton took her place as a matter of course, and was fitted to shine above all other stars in the galaxy.

He strolled many a night with his hands in his pockets and a pipe instead of a cigar between his teeth, where not a mortal knew him, past houses in Piccadilly and Park Lane, lit up that gentlefolks might hold their revels. He pushed his way through the crowds collected to stare at the carriages, as they rolled up to the covered entrances and put down the occupants—of whose fine feathers and sparkling stones the mob had a glimpse while the guests passed into the flower-lined

halls and went up the embowered stairs to the ball-rooms, from which the music of brass bands kept sounding. The fellows, who seemed still more the masters of the situation than the footmen, as they rid themselves of their crush hats and other encumbrance, and proceeded to join their partners, were perfectly at ease, and had not been condemned to undergo an absurd ordeal for a full-grown man, or to feel hot and cold in such scenes, as he would feel, even after he had taken lessons in dancing. He hoped desperately Lady Fermor would not turn round and 'peach,' and Miss Compton find him out. His heart swelled with angry despair of ever feeling on a level with born and bred jackanapes. It seemed to him that he was going on the course and entering the lists for the sweepstakes with such a mere shread of a chance that his failure would be accompanied with the roars of ridicule and shouts of derision which he had often helped to raise on other courses. Yet there were drops of blood in his veins which gave him some title—as the squires of Eastham had long ago admitted—to enter such houses, where his acres and title put him, so far as they were concerned, on an equality

with all, save those of the highest rank, in these assemblies. In the process of becoming a finished gentleman, Sir William was, to a certain extent, disillusioned and rubbed the wrong way; so that when he returned to Whitehills in good time, and found as the first thing that awaited him, a note in a shaky old hand from Lady Fermor, to tell him that Lord Fermor had been seized with one of his attacks, and been so ill, that though he was now better, the ball was unavoidably postponed for a month, he said to himself he had known all along this was how it would end.

It was in vain that he had sought by despicable efforts to cut the figure of a monkey obeying the directions of an organ-grinder, who did not even play his own organ, and put his scholar through his paces as if he had never been drilled, as if he had not been a drill sergeant in his own person, and ended by finding fault with his step and his carriage! He was rightly served for his folly. What a grin it would call forth if it were ever known to his old comrades of the barrack-yard! for whom, though they were rough chaps enough, he was free to own he sometimes secretly sighed. He missed his

mates, among whom he had crowed, instead of hanging his head and singing dumb. Where was the good of a title and an estate if they only made a man feel small among other baronets and squires who had worn their honours all their lives, to whom their grandeur came naturally, who knew what to say and do on every possible emergency? Yet with one notable exception, Sir William did not see that the circle, the members of which ought to be his associates, were so very much better than their fellow-creatures after all.

Sir William put no faith in Lady Fermor's assurance that the ball was only postponed for a short time, since she would have Lord Fermor as well as when the affair was proposed, before many weeks were over. She could not make him live or die, though she had driven rough-shod over many a barrier, and stuck at little in her time. It sounded heartless and profane in the old woman, who had wound him round her finger, to pretend to such power.

The young man was suffering from one of the fits of reaction which beset many people who have far less reason for them than he had. His loneliness, which had haunted him

in town, struck even more coldly to his heart when he returned to Whitehills. He was not without invitations to his neighbours' houses. Lady Thwaite and Lady Fermor were not the only women in that part of the country who decreed that Whitehills, even with Sir William into the bargain, was not to be despised. Every woman with marriageable daughters, from office-bearing, harassed Mrs. Acton, who was as poor as a many-childed church-mouse, to Mrs. Hollis, of Thornbrake, who was rich in her own right, and rich in her husband's, felt bound to cultivate the new-comer for the good of womankind, so far as to see what could be made of him. But Sir William, though he might kick against his subjection at intervals, remained loyal to his chief patroness. In the present state of matters at Lambford he would not go into company. His unvarnished refusals, together with the extent to which he had previously availed himself of the Lambford hospitalities, tended to confirm the rumour which was already afloat that, in newspaper language, there was a marriage on the *tapis* between Sir William Thwaite and Miss Compton.

This gossip impaired one source of attrac-

tion—that of a disengaged eligible young man—but filled its place with another. It would be interesting to see Sir William Thwaite and Iris Compton together, and judge if there were any truth in the story, anything serious between the couple. To think that a woman over eighty should step in adroitly, while younger people held back, in order to subject the prize to inspection, and win it before their eyes! Here was food for excitement in a dull country neighbourhood, while the question in suspense promised to prove an important agent in filling the Lambford ball-room. Instead of a sprinkling of reluctant guests, Lady Fermor, chuckling in her sleeve, was in danger of being publicly and privately assailed for invitations.

In the meantime, one of the two centres of interest was utterly unconscious of the potent charm with which she had been invested. Her great friend, Lucy Acton, might have given Iris some inkling of the truth, but unfortunately Lucy had been working day and night to enable the female teacher in the Rector's school to bring up her pupils to the standard of attainment which should secure a Government grant, and Iris was occupied at

home and less at the Rectory than usual at this date.

The military discipline which Sir William had known, helped his sense of propriety in holding himself aloof from his servants. The one to whom he drew nearest was the young groom who accompanied his master in his rides. This was an honest, sensible lad, a countryman, born and bred at Whitehills. Sir William and Bill Rogers were about the same age, while Bill was *au fait* to all the rural knowledge, with which Sir William, brought up in a town, proved scantily acquainted. And a lad like Bill had at his finger-ends the local annals of which his master was profoundly ignorant. From a casual observation now and then, the two took to chatting a little together—quite respectfully on Bill's part, about the crops and the crows, the colts and the rabbits. Bill would venture to call Sir William's attention to this farm, and tell him there had been Wilkinsons in it, folk said, as long as there had been Thwaites in Whitehills. He would point to that mill, the lease of which belonged to Sir William also. It seemed but right the Squire should know what trouble there had been in the

millers' family, for the last two seasons, since the miller met with the bad accident, when his arm was caught in the machinery, and his wife was of no use because of 'a waste,' while their eldest son had taken to drink.

Mr. Miles had striven in vain—as it seemed to him—to awaken in Sir William sufficient curiosity about his tenants, with whose interests his own must be inextricably bound up. He was new and strange to the place and life, and he was still staggered and shaken by the events and revolutions of the last few months. It was different now, or Bill communicated the information in a simpler, more telling manner. Sir William listened, asked questions, even went so far as to certify some of Bill's narratives and make a movement in connection with them. And it must be said of Bill that he did not abuse the influence of which he was not altogether unconscious.

In other departments, even of his own house, the Squire of Whitehills continued terribly unsocial. He gave deep offence to Mr. Cumberbatch, the butler, by ordering his—the Squire's—meals to be brought into the library, and by keeping a book lying beside

his plate. Sir William might think of his butler's feelings, if he had none of his own. It was too absurd for a fellow who had pipe-clayed his belts and cleaned his boots to make a pretence of being 'that scholarly.' Why, the Dean had never looked at a book for full half an hour before luncheon, saying the mere sight of print, hard on a meal, spoilt digestion. As for reading during dinner, of course he knew better ; he was a gentleman. Even when his ladies were from home he was sensible what was due to the table and the wines—not to say to the cook and the butler. But what could be expected of a squire who drank water like a temperance lecturer ? The Dean was an affable gentleman in proper quarters ; but Sir William had not half a dozen words to say—except, as Mr. Cumberbatch had heard, to that lump of a lad, Bill Rogers. Mr. Cumberbatch had no fault to find with Bill ; but what could *he* tell a gentleman that would be of use to him ?

Mr. Cumberbatch was not a bad fellow himself in the main. He could be just, he could even be magnanimous. But he was full of class prejudices, and he had not the breadth of mind to comprehend that while he himself

might repel, even alarm, Sir William as an old prig and humbug of a butler, Bill was Sir William's contemporary, 'a nice chap' who would not have been more than 'a cut above Will Thwaite' in the old days.

The long summer evenings tempted Sir William to saunter, generally aimlessly enough, beyond the park, along the country roads. When he passed the way-side inns of Eastham, the sound of skittles and jovial voices, rich in the inflections and idioms of the native dialect, filled the air. But the only effect of the lively turmoil was to hasten the wayfarer's steps, and cause him to turn into more secluded by-paths. There was one which led by a high matted-together hawthorn hedge, one tangle of traveller's joy and black and green bryony. Beyond lay a long strip of underwood, prized as an excellent covert for game. Sir William knew that to his cost. He had happened to take a terrier, which had attached itself to him, along the field path. The seductions of scent had proved too strong for the small animal. She had forsaken her late love, and plunged into the underwood, over a sluggish ditch and through a hole which was by no means large enough to admit

her companion. Sir William had hesitated to tear his way through, and face, perhaps, one of his own indignant keepers. He had fought shy of them, as he had fought shy of his retainers generally. And the keepers, especially, were down in the mouth with regard to a master who, so far as they could discover, had not asked a single question about the state of the birds and whether poachers were hard to grapple with on the Whitehills ground. The keepers' importance was as seriously threatened as that of the butler. They were only dimly aware that Sir William had in his day fired at game rather bigger and less safe than partridges and hares. Nor did they suspect that he had been testing the truth of his aim at a target, and had inspected all Sir John's guns with some interest and a clear idea of trying his luck on the first of September, or whatever day was the law of the land and the gentry.

In the meantime Sir William had stood still and listened to a great hurry-skurry behind the hedge, and such sharp yelps of frantic eagerness and delight from Vixen, that he was sensible all his whistling and shouting would not bring her back. He feared that dog-slaughter would take place before he

could prevent it, and before the perpetrator of the act was cool enough to recognise the intruder, and to realise that the owner of both dog and game stood on the other side of the hedge. However, there are consciences in dogs, and Vixen awakened in time to a sense of the folly and impropriety of her conduct. She sneaked back with her eyes scratched and watering, her nostrils full of sand, and her coat stuck all over with dead leaves, broken twigs, and seeded heads of grass, presenting the usual disreputable look of a poacher caught red-handed. Sir William took care not to include Vixen in his further rambles in the direction of Hawley Scrub.

He was alone as he strolled one memorable evening across the meadow-land by the Scrub. It was the loveliest hour of the twenty-four, at the height of the young summer. The sun had set, but the light was still clear, not only in the west, where rose and purple had given place to a pale amber, but in the rest of the blue sky, bluer than at any other time, as the corn in the ear and the leaves on the trees were greener.

The trumpets of the greater bindweed and the round faces of the moon daisies, already

wet with dew, still stood out prominently among their surroundings, but they were rapidly assuming a character totally different from that they had borne at noon. They were becoming ghostly as by moonlight, and striking even an unimaginative person with a vague impression of something wistful, solemn, mysterious in their ordinarily frank, familiar, cheerful beauty; just as the commonest, homeliest pieces of furniture acquire an altered aspect when seen by the strange light and shadows of a solitary candle in the hush of midnight or in the half-obscurity of the grey dawn. As for the closed poppies, like big blood drops, and the blue corn-flowers, like clippings of the sky, they were growing dim and indistinct in their deepening, darkening colour.

Sir William had a love of nature, though he could not have expressed his feelings on the subject very intelligibly. He liked the look of the place at this season. He liked the occasional rustle and chirp of birds gone to roost, and the fitful, drowsy notes of the final even-song of the thrush, before the bird gave way to its rival, the nightingale, which were the only sounds that broke the silence.

Presently he came in sight of the waters of a pond—looking steely blue as a stage to its leaden greyness, when the night had fairly fallen. Eastham was so great in ponds and ditches, that it would have looked as if one of its most distinguishing attributes were wanting if standing water, in some form, had been long absent from the landscape. In June, flowering rushes and flags formed a suitable fringe to these ponds and ditches, while the former were sometimes thickly set with the great white cups of the water-lily, and the smaller stars of the water ranunculus.

But it was neither water-lily nor ranunculus that Sir William was staring at, when he drew nearer the pond, and stepping through the sedges, regardless of the slushy footing, gained the brink of deep water. He had his eye on a tuft of coarse grass, among which he believed he discovered the tail of a water-rat—yes, it was a water-rat, and if Vixen had been with him, there might have been some splashing and rare sport, for water-rats had not been much more in Will Thwaite's way than hares and pheasants. Presently there was a splashing, whatever might be said of the sport, without the aid of Vixen. Sir William's foot-

ing gave way, and he fell into the water. It was deeper than he had imagined, with an oozy bottom which yielded to his weight. In a moment the muddy water was far above his knees, rising breast high. He was a fair swimmer, and would have been safe in an open sea, in moderately calm weather, for an hour or more; but this small pond, when he tried to strike out, was like a miniature submerged forest, with roots of trees and bushes, and a dense growth of water-plants. He could not free himself sufficiently to swim. He was sinking deeper every instant. He could still keep himself afloat, principally by resting his chin on a convenient but slender willow bough which reached his length, and by clutching with both hands thrust into a thicket of osiers invading the water. But he could not pull himself up, from the nature of the ground and the inefficiency of his support. He had cause to envy his decoy-duck, the water-rat, and to suspect he might perish with as little grace as he and Vixen would have granted to the denizen of the pond.

Sir William, though he had grown laconic, was not slow to proclaim his case. 'Holloa! as sure as fate I'll be drowned,' it is to be

feared he said, returning to his vernacular in the exigency of the moment, and with all the volubility which the occasion required he shouted for help.

To his relief somebody answered him almost immediately from no great distance.

‘What’s ado? Don’t let go. There’s no danger.’

The last statement sounded weakly, flatteringly, though it was uttered in a loud rather deep voice, which might have proceeded from a man’s chest. But on Sir William’s shifting his chin by half an inch, he saw it was a woman who was hastening towards him, and did not feel surprised, in spite of his worship of Iris Compton, that she should talk nonsense in such a contingency.

‘It’s much you know of it,’ he protested indignantly. ‘Run and fetch any man you can find; look sharp, if you want to save me.’

‘That would be an uncommon clever way of saving you,’ she retorted, still advancing quickly towards him, ‘when father ain’t at home, and I don’t know of any other man within half a mile. Just do as I bid you. Hold on like grim death, and I’ll help you out before you can say “Jack Robinson.”’

What business had you down dabbling among them water-docks? There ain't no wild-ducks' nests here, if that was what you were after.'

He might have answered her that he had the right possessed by the monarch of all he surveyed, but he contented himself with indignantly forbidding her to come a step nearer to him, as soon as he saw what she was going to try. She had slid half-way through the fringe of rushes, and was proceeding to precipitate herself still farther, hanging forward with one arm extended to meet his clasp, and the other thrown round a sapling willow which looked perilously slim as a support for both.

'I'll pull you down,' he remonstrated. 'Do you want me to drown you, too? Do what I told you.'

'And do what I tell you, you great donkey!' she insisted unceremoniously. 'Do you mean to keep me hanging here all night? I'll go bail I've as strong an arm as you any day, unless you're as big as Dan'l Bates. There, hold on to the bushes with one hand, and give me the other. Try to get your foot upon that patch of dock; the ground shelves there

—I know every inch of it—then spring! Didn't I tell you I'd fish you out? Don't go to come over me with your man's strength again.'

Sir William found himself standing dripping like a water-god, if water-gods are ever slimy and green with duck-weed, confronting a strong woman of his own age, and nearly his own height, wearing a black woollen gown and a red handkerchief knotted at her throat. Her head was bare, and her ruffled, dark hair was more conspicuous for its luxuriance than for neatness of arrangement. She turned upon him a brown face buxom even in the weatherbeaten texture and tint of the skin. The full red lips parted and showing the white, glittering teeth, and the well-opened, grey eyes looking across at him with a bold, blithe challenge, formed the most conspicuous features.

His inspection and the thanks he was beginning to utter were brought to a summary conclusion. 'You'll have to come straight to our house—it ain't a hundred yards off—and strip, and put on some of father's clothes, while I'll throw yours into a bucket. I'll rake together the fire, and you'll swallow a

nip of summat hot, or we'll have you took with aguer before we're done with you. Have you heard tell there's aguer in them parts, yet?'

He followed her without resistance into the Scrub, which might have been an enchanted forest for him, though he was a clownish squire, and his guide the most primitive and plain-spoken of princesses.

She stopped abruptly and faced round on him. She had been glancing repeatedly at him, and she found herself on the eve of a discovery which arrested her. 'Ben't you the new Squire, Sir William, hissself?' she suddenly charged him, with a mixture of dismay, defiance, and lurking amusement. 'I've been out of the way, at the death of old auntie at the Quarries, for the better part of the spring and summer. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, I have got into a scrape, and no mistake!' She hid her crimsoned face for a second in rustic affront and alarm, as a child might have done, then looked sharply up and around her, as if she were preparing to bolt from the consequences of her lack of ceremony in saving the Squire. Altogether her behaviour showed a jumble of genuine unreasoning mortification

and alarm, with a tremulous dash of diversion at the absurdity of the situation.

He put it before her in a more satisfactory light. 'I was such an ass as to tumble into that beastly hole; and I believe that at this moment I should have been lying at the foot with my teeth clenched on a mouthful of mud, if it had not been for your sense and pluck. I'm no end obliged to you—that's about it, though when I come to think of it, I don't know that there is another human being to say as much to you on my account. But you'll take me to your place and do what you can for me—won't you?—like a kind soul; for, to tell the truth, I don't like to show before my fine servants in this guise.' His heart was warm with gratitude to his rescuer. He had found free speech wherewith to address the country girl, and under the influence of his freedom, she gradually grew glib as she was wont to be, with only a relapse now and again into consternation—brightened by a suspicion of a frolic, every time they became silent. 'What's your name, if I may make so bold?' he asked, as if she were the lady and he the servant. All the time, he was expanding into communicativeness, under the welcome

consciousness of no longer feeling daunted and depressed, forced to pick and choose his words as he had been for the last six months. 'What may your father do when he is at home?'

'Oh, I'm called Honor—Honor Smith; and father is old Abe Smith; Abe short for Abel. He has been one of the under-keepers for a lot of years, so that I were born and brought up at our cottage in Hawley Scrub here. But father do be getting old and losing favour with Waterpark, the head-keeper, and my brothers did no good, but gave trouble, and father—he were blamed for it. Ted, he 'listed; and young Abe, he went off to America. Now, father and me—mother's dead before I can remember—we're thinking of going out, in one of them emigrant ships, to join young Abe in the Back Woods. That name sounds pleasant, don't it?'

CHAPTER XIII.

A HAIR OF THE DOG THAT BIT HIM.

ABE SMITH's cottage was a tumble-down, picturesque, self-coloured lodge in the wilderness. The interior failed to do credit to Honor's housekeeping. Disorder reigned over the articles, few as they were, in the family room. The furniture was summed up in an old oak-table, which Lady Thwaite might have coveted, though it was battered and standing insecurely on three legs ; a convenient deal chest, into which everything might be stuffed ; a chair or two—that for Abe an old armchair as black as the table ; a cupboard with the door half off its hinges, exposing the scanty supply of common coarse crockery.

But the visitor had hardly time to look around on inanimate objects, for, contrary to expectation, the owner of the cottage was at

home. He knew Sir William by sight, though Sir William could not profess to return the compliment. Old Abe testified to his knowledge by the formality with which he stood up, as fast as his stiffening joints would allow, and removed his cap; at the same time he glanced with a flurried look at his daughter for an explanation, which she did not delay.

Then Sir William received a considerable shock as he listened to an entirely new version of the accident.

‘I was a-walking round the pond with an eye for them plaguy ducks that wander all the way over from Mistley Down, father, when what should I see but the young Squire wallowing in the mire and water at the very worst place, where Adams met his death. Didn’t I just run and cry, “Your honour, mind what you’re about; don’t flounder an inch farther, as you value your life, and I’ll do my best, which is my bounden duty, to save you!” And, sure enough, I crept through the osiers, and held on by one hand till he gripped the other. You know I’m strong, father, and Sir William’s active, so we struggled out of the water, and here we are.’

Several times while she was speaking she

gave Sir William a half-cunning, half-comical glance of warning and mutual intelligence, as if she dared him to contradict her. Once, when she passed close to him, behind her father, as she was bustling about to make up the fire, which was lying white in ashes, she muttered so that Sir William only could hear, 'He'll like that way of putting it best.'

But Sir William did not like it, and shifted his wet feet uneasily. He was a truthful man who had never 'crammed' a comrade, unless in the plainest chaffing. His sister Jen would not have told a lie to save her life. Perhaps it was a sign of their drops of gentle blood; perhaps it belonged to a higher order of gentility.

There seemed the less sense in Honor Smith's easy fabrications, that her father looked far more pacific than savage—not a man to fly into a fury on a small provocation. He was behaving to his guest so deferentially that it was difficult to separate obsequiousness from the deference.

Sir William amazed his host by absolutely declining spirits of any description and defying the consequences; but he was anxious to have his clothes dried for the reason he had

given Honor. Here a difficulty presented itself. It was not from her father that Honor had inherited a splendid physique. He was a little hairy man, who, in his faded moleskins, more tattered than patched, and weather-stained fringed gaiters, looked shaggy all over, like a creature of the wilds and the waters, a badger or an otter, rather than an able-bodied man. It seemed as if Sir William could have put him into one of his pockets. No garment of Abe's would be of the slightest temporary use to Abe's master.

'Dear sakes! what are we thinking of!' cried Honor, in scorn of her own slowness and forgetfulness. 'There's Uncle Sam's old regimentals in the drawer of the chest. They're the best we have to offer, sir; and Uncle Sam was a big man, when he were alive, every way.'

Sir William pricked his ears at the word regimentals, and then looked put out. What a fool he was to mind a dead man's clothes, though they were regimentals! Very likely they did not belong to any department of the service he had known. What though he had thought never to wear the Queen's livery again! It was a big lie that he had disgraced

it, beyond redemption, the last time he had it on in the square at Nhilpoor, when he wrenched the stripes from his arm and flung them in his colonel's face. He must put on the red jacket once again, at a pinch, unless he cared to be laid on his beam-ends with ague, or worse, since his teeth were beginning to chatter in his head.

Honor mistook the Squire's hesitation.

‘Uncle Sam's clothes are as good as new,’ she said a little huffily, preparing to pull out what had been put away with some care in the drawer of the chest. ‘He were a good many pegs above us, so that his toggery is a'most fit for a gentleman. I have often been on father to sell it right away; but it do be a kind of credit for us to have it, if it were only to show that we hadn't all of us our backs allus at the wall. And father there has a notion that the things are lucky lying ready for use, and that Ted may pick-up and come back some day as smart as them which 'listed before him. That will happen when the Queen axes us all to a snack, and a bed after it, at one of the palaces. It will be as good as airing them clothes, besides being a mighty compliment, if you will take a turn in them,

Sir William, while I am cleaning your own suit. Father and I will go out and leave you to the fire and your own company, if you'll please shift yourself before the floor is in a swim.'

It was clear Uncle Sam had been the great man of the family, and that it was in seeking to pay proper honour to the Squire, the uniform had been brought out for his benefit.

Sir William, when left to himself, looked with some agitation at what would have awakened no interest in another man in his place, if it had not excited amusement or annoyance. He lifted up the different portions of the dress with a kind of trepidation, yet with yearning. It was all complete, though a little old-fashioned. By what appeared a singular coincidence, the rank of Sam Smith, which he had not forfeited, must have been the same as that to which Will Thwaite had risen. There were the identical stripes of which he had made short work in his fit of frenzy. He had a glimpse of the old soldier's sword lying gleaming in the half-shut drawer. Sir William dressed himself punctiliously, finding the clothes not

far from his fit. Then he looked in the little looking-glass which hung, for Honor Smith's convenience, on the wall opposite the window where a withered nosegay thrust into the neck of a bottle stood on the sill. A thrill ran through him as he regarded his image in the glass. He felt at home in the borrowed clothes. He took out the sword and began to make the accustomed passes with it. Ah! that was a deal better than jigging like an idiot to the prancing of another idiot, who could not even play his kit without the help of another man.

Sir William was disturbed by Honor's knock at the door. He must be quick about changing his clothes, if she were to have them cleaned and even partly dried before midnight.

Was there a spell in these old regimentals which became Sir William so well, that he had not to wait for Abe's respectful compliments, since he saw with gratified vanity the admiration which shone in Honor's great grey eyes? How long it was since his heart had grown warm under the influence of a woman's inadvertently betrayed admiration! He was not very vain, but he was sensitive

to public opinion even on his looks. In his old estate he had been a favourite, rather a hero, with women; and though he had shown himself particular in his taste, so as to have been something of a rover who had found no humble heroine, he did not object to the hero-worship.

Lately it had chilled him to meet none save critical eyes. He did not believe Miss Compton had ever wasted a thought on his inches or the colour of his hair—only old Lady Fermor had ever made him feel that she found him a well-knit, comely fellow.

He had not looked so gallant and gay, or made himself so entirely at his ease, for many a day. He sat at the fire and smoked with old Abe, and heard dubious stories of poaching scuffles, or told tales of a soldier's life, in which Abe was interested for his son Ted's sake, and because of gratifying memories of the brother, who had been almost a gentleman in the under-keeper's eyes, and who seemed to sit there again before him.

Sir William shouted thanks and jests through the half-open door into the back kitchen, in which Honor was so obligingly at work on his clothes. After her part

was done, there was still the drying of the soused garments, and that necessitated the guest's further stay, and his taking a share in the family supper which was pressed upon him with the unstinted hospitality of the host's class.

The meal was composed of choicer fare than might have been hoped for from the rest of the establishment. There were cold roasted leveret, pigeon-pie, and poached eggs. An explanation was offered of the nature of the feast, with so little disagreement between the speakers and so few break-downs, that a more thoughtful man than Sir William might have come to the conclusion the father and daughter were accomplished experts in such apologies. Abe had found a poacher's snare with a leveret in it, and he had taken care that the setter of the snare should not profit by his success. The wild pigeons had been brought down by Ikey Mushet's sling. The boy meant no harm, but he must be taught not to take such liberties in future, as Sir William would be shooting both the crows and the pigeons for his own and his friends' diversion. The eggs were plovers' eggs, which Honor had gathered as far off as Mistley Downs.

Sir William heard every word as if it were gospel, and did not betray the faintest suspicion that he was eating savoury food of his own providing—the game, pigeons, and partridges' eggs which he paid a gang of men, with Abe among them, for protecting from all spoilers.

Sir William was good company on this occasion. He was as much carried away by reaction, old association, the spirit of defiance which was apt to arise in the man, as if he had swallowed bumpers of strong drink. He joked and rattled off camp experiences. He proved a capital listener to the annals of the woods and fields. He was gay and hearty, until he was nearly volunteering a song which had been the usual accompaniment of former merry-makings. It seemed as if his later dreams and the very image of Iris Compton were for the moment swept from his mind. At last the play was played out, and Sir William, re-habilitated in his half-dry clothes, took a cordial leave of his entertainers.

The fraternization had been complete while it lasted, and could not have astounded others more than it did some of the participators in it.

‘Did you ever, father!’ protested Honor. ‘If the Squire ain’t one of ourselves, I can’t tell who is. Why, he has been jack-fellow alike and no make-believe with us, ever since I brought him in like a drowned rat. He is the right sort to fill old Sir John’s shoes. But won’t he make the stuck-up ladies and gentlemen stare? Ain’t I quick to have been and nabbed him in this way? Now we may laugh in Waterpark’s face. If we only go on as we have begun, it may be “change seats, the King’s come,” with you and he, and we stepping into his grand cottage, and no ‘Merica for us after all, before the year is out.’

‘And you may be Lady Thwaite of Whitehills—is that the next thing?’ inquired Abe, with mild scepticism and sarcasm, for he stood in some awe of his daughter. ‘And sure enough that will be when the Queen or the Lord Mayor bids us to a feast, or when the world comes to an end, as is much the same thing. It’s like it is turned upside down already, when a chap like yon have got the property. But don’t you let your fancy cut capers and get the better of you, so as you’ll sup disappointment for your pains,

Hon. This here lad be come of the people, and no mistake. He ain't the supercilily cut of a gentleman, though the name be Thwaite and he do belong to the tribe. But he ain't quite one of us neither, not he, though he may favour your Uncle Sam as were bound to rise in the world. The Squire couldn't take no drink like a man, and as far as I could see he didn't tell no crackers, neither one way nor t'other, bouncing or sly, which if ever man had a grand chance to do he had. It would be like playing with fire to have to do with he. You could never tell when you had him or when you wanted him. He would be off like a shot when you least expected it. I ain't so cock-sure that there ben't the making of one sort of gentleman in him, as gentlemen goes, the sort as is blunt—maybe thin-skinned and peppery, but is as nice about their word as if it was their nails or their teeth. And when I come to think of it, Sir William was as clean as a dook all over, like your Uncle Sam, barring the mud be brought up out of the pond. He may let us stay over the autumn, till we take ship to 'Merica. Waterpark can hardly have the face to make a stand about trumpery hodd's

and ends, and think for to turn us out at the last, when he knows that you drew Sir William by the 'airs of the 'ead, as I may say, out of the pond; but that's all the good we're like to get of the adventure, if you'll believe me for your own good, my girl, and I am an old man. I should know summat by this time of the day.

'Like enough, father,' answered Honor indifferently, as if she were getting weary of the subject; 'but that's not to keep me from putting in a claim to the Squire's acquaintance, and getting a guinea or a five-pound note when I've worked for it. Maybe I'll get more, maybe no,' she added with a laugh. 'Are you going the round of the walks to-night, when Luke Evans is to be at the turnstile about two in the morning? If you go, I'm with you. I'm as fond of a rove when timid folks is in their beds, as you can be, or young Abe or Ted ever were.'

'The more's the pity, lass,' said old Abe, in a moralizing vein, 'though it do come nat'ral to some women as to most men. Your mother now, she were reared in the Quarries, yet she took as easy to the woods as a fish to the water. More by token her brothers were

the biggest poachers hereabout, and Morry, he were transported for life, for his share in such a tussle as has not been heard of since that day. Me and Waterpark were in it, and I was in mortal terror I should have to fire at Morry or bear the mark of his bludgeon. There's no doubt company's cheery,' reflected Abe, going off on a new track, which yet had its link with the former line of conversation ; 'wandering about in the dark gets a thought creepy and sickifying as a man wears up in years, and recalls old mates and old frays.'

Sir William, whose habits till now had been as regular as those of any of 'the Methody parsons' to whom he was sometimes compared, for the first time since his coming to Whitehills, kept his servants up late without previous warning.

Cumberbatch, who had constituted himself his master's keeper, experienced real anxiety on his account. When it was relieved by the Squire's making his appearance, the sufferer could scarcely go so far as to take the offender to task ; but he looked Sir William in the face with such solemn reproach, that the delinquent was impelled to explain. 'I stepped into a pond a good bit off, and had

to wait in a house till my clothes were dried. No, I don't want any supper. No, I shouldn't think of hot brandy-and-water. That will do.' Sir William was himself again, cold and reserved. Will Thwaite, open-hearted and reckless, had been left at the cottage by Hawley Scrub. But the Squire asked Bill Rogers, during their next morning's ride, what he knew of an old under-keeper and his daughter living together in the worst cottage Sir William had seen on his lands.

'They're a bad lot, Sir William,' answered Bill promptly; 'leastways old Abe ain't what he should be. Old folk will have it Abe's come of a queer breed, being a far-off shoot from them squatters as made free with East-ham when great part of it—because of the water lying easy everywhere—was no man's land, given over to the fowls of the air and the fish of the fresh-water seas, and to them as liked to catch them. I don't want to tell no tales, but Abe's failings are piper's news, and there's a score of his neighbours as will let you know if I don't, while the man is going for sure across the seas in the autumn. The wonder is that he has been kept so long; but old Sir John, he took it into his head

after it were a bit muddled, that Waterpark, the head-keeper, had a spite at Smith, and he would permit no spites, would Sir John, save his own, which were his right like, he being squire and master.'

'Is it certain Sir John was in the wrong?' inquired his successor, as if he too were jealous of his likes and dislikes.

'Well, sir, I would not go for to contradict you,' replied Bill, with sincere respect, 'but Abe connected hisself by marriage with poachers notorious. That might have been his misfortune more than his fault, but the word went, even before Abe's sons were half grown, that he were in league with the poachers, and connived at their snares and shots, instead of fighting them fair as the other keepers fought them. There could be no mistake about Ted and young Abe, they soon made the country too hot to hold them. I never heard of a Smith as was a credit to the family save Sergeant Smith, a brother of Abe's that enlisted when he was in his teens, and did good in foreign parts, and only came home to die, before he was corrupted by the rest of the lot.'

'And what about the daughter, Bill?'

‘Why, if you will believe it, sir, Honor, the girl—that is as big and strong as one of her brothers, have took up the trade too, and is as wild as need be. She had a bad upbringing. Her mother, such as she was, died when the lass was in her cradle; but what finished her off, years and years gone, was that a young chap with whom she kep’ company had a hole drilled through his shoulder, one September night, and were taken up and died of the wound in Birkett gaol. She’s the strappingest lass going,’ Bill said with some lurking admiration, ‘and I don’t say she ain’t an honest woman. She’s kep’ men at the staff’s end—all but poor Hughie Guild—and he would be a bold man who would look soft on Honor Smith, or speak sweet to her against her will. She’s a regular randy, nigh as bad as a gipsy. She’s never in the house save to cook her father’s meals. She ain’t up to sweeping or charing, or even dressing herself fine like other women, not since Hughie met his end, and that is good six or seven years gone, when she was a slip of a handsome girl; but the word goes she can tramp day or night, and keep out of the way when she’s wanted, and set a snare, and bring down a bird, and dodge,

and lie, and toss off a glass neat—not that I ever heard tell of her being seen in drink, like old Abe's self. That's all I've got to say of them Smiths, if you please, Sir William.'

The description did not please Sir William, but he gave no sign. He vouchsafed an explanation to Bill, as the master of the house had offered an excuse to his butler, and he drew an inference which he had already drawn more than once before.

'I was indebted to these people last night, Bill. I fell like a big baby into the pond, near their door, and the girl you speak of gave me a leg-up—when it was touch and go with me, for I had no room to swim—as if I had been the girl and she the man. Of course you did not know this when you spoke, and I didn't ought to have asked you a question without telling you first. But you understand I don't care to hear the Smiths spoke badly of, after this.'

'No, sir. I beg your pardon, sir. I hope you believe me, I wouldn't speak harm of no friend of yours, not if I knowed it, for my wages twice told,' cried Bill with genuine regret, for he was quickly acquiring a warm regard for his master.

But the servant's private reflection was, 'Lord, to think of his making friends with them Smiths, as if he were the forlornest wretch in the kingdom ; and he Sir William, and the Squire of Whitehills, with half of the gentlemen and ladies in the county ready to strike their hands in his, I'll go bail, if he'll only give them time ! They may say what they like of his smelling of the barrack-yard, and not of the hofficers' quarters there ; either he's too good for this world, or one sick of his lone position.'

Afterwards the servants' hall at Whitehills learnt all the details of the accident, as the world below stairs does not fail to ascertain, in spite of the absence of direct information from the fountain-head, what that other world above stairs has been doing. These judges picked up the additional information that Sir William had been over to see the Smiths, once or twice, during the next fortnight. Mr. Cumberbatch merely turned up his nose in silence, and thought it was what he might have expected, from a baronet's unseemly preference for a young groom over a middle-aged butler. Bill, too, was silent, but he groaned within himself.

‘He ain’t fit to take care of hisself. Why don’t some of his own kind, the kind he’s in now, look after him? There’s the old lady over at Lambford, what runs after him as if she were a gal herself; but they do say she’s a devil’s himp, if ever there was one. Why don’t Sir John’s widder stay here till he’s served with a wife, or take the Squire to bide with her at Netherton?’ questioned poor Bill unreasonably, and with a fine disregard of the proprieties in the amendment he proposed to institute. ‘I’m blowed if I can tell for what the like of she is charged on the estate, if it ain’t to do for the Squire when he wants her. If I were my lady, I wouldn’t take my wages and give no work for them,’ concluded Bill, rubbing down the horse he was grooming with virtuous vigour.

Possibly Lady Thwaite’s notion of doing for Sir William differed slightly from Bill’s, but she was not without a conscience on that point.

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS COMPTON'S BALL.

LADY FERMOR was as good as her word. She brought Lord Fermor up to that point of recovery which made it permissible and not outrageous that a ball should take place in his house of Lambford, where he was dragging out his weary days.

The ball had come to be called Miss Compton's ball, without any objection on the part of Lady Fermor, although she suggested an improvement.

'It may also bear the name of my worthy young neighbour, Sir William Thwaite,' said the old lady demurely. 'It is his first ball in Eastham, as it is my grand-daughter's first ball at Lambford. Let it be Miss Compton and Sir William Thwaite's ball, if you please. Awkward to couple the two names together, do you think? Oh! I don't mind it,' declared

Lady Fermor, with such an unblushing amount of candour that it sounded as if there were something under it, something to excuse the indiscretion.

But the persons appealed to judged that the union of names was premature, to say the least. Even supposing Miss Compton and Sir William had got so far as a betrothal. England was not Germany, where betrothals were announced like marriages, and betrothed pairs appeared in public together the same as husband and wife. The proposal savoured of the indecorum for which Lady Fermor at the best had been distinguished, while only to call the ball Miss Compton's ball really relieved some excellent people from rankling scruples. It was one thing to hasten to stand by poor Iris Compton, who, while one of themselves, was guiltless of the smallest offence against morals, and another to flock to a ball of Lady Fermor's, even though a long lapse of years had softened the turpitude of her misdeeds. As for Lady Fermor, she did not care what the hypocrites and fools called the ball if they came to it, and it served her purpose.

Mr. Mildmay and his wife lent Lambford their countenance for the event. He was

simply and strictly polite as usual. She looked frightened to speak or move lest she should compromise herself, while she stuck to her husband like his shadow, as if she might require his protection at any moment.

‘Does the good woman think I shall take a bite of her?’ protested Lady Fermor, in one of her slight asides. But both Mrs. Mildmay and Lady Fermor knew it was not being bitten but being socially contaminated that the lady dreaded. It was a little compensation to her for being dragged down to face this horrible ordeal, to be able to take stock, covertly, of the possessions among which she was to reign as the future Lady Fermor. Mrs. Mildmay did not count Iris one of these possessions, and would almost as soon have proposed to be on confidential terms with the wicked old grandmother as with the innocent young grand-daughter. In fact Mrs. Mildmay, though she was not a colourless, cowardly, self-engrossed woman when she happened to be at large, had very little doubt that Miss Compton’s innocence was nothing better than a callow stage of wickedness, and felt disposed to regard it as more insidious, if less repulsive, than the advanced stages.

Iris was glad to turn from the chill and mortification of Mrs. Mildmay's unthawed reserve, and her constant withdrawal to her husband's side, to the friendly presence of Lucy Acton, who had been allowed to spend a few days at Lambford to support Iris on the great occasion of her ball. It was something like a preparation for home gaiety to have Lucy on one of her rare visits, and to grow enthusiastic in her company over the dresses, the decorations, the dancing, the supper. Iris would have taken delight in them all of her own accord had she not been behind the scenes, whereas Lucy was not only an outsider, she happened to be a matter-of-fact girl, who took things as she found them, and did not seek to look below the surface. She was a good daughter, and an assiduous helper of her father and mother, both with the parish and the younger children. She was a faithful friend to Iris, and paid back with easy fondness the girl's fervent affection. But Lucy Acton was not gifted either with much sensitiveness of feeling or discrimination of character. She was inferior to Iris both in heart and mind. Her personal appearance was of less consequence; but in this case the body

reflected the spirit. Lucy Acton was a well-grown, rather comely, but perfectly commonplace-looking young gentlewoman, the colour of whose hair and eyes, and the shape of whose nose and mouth, though they were all quite well defined, her acquaintances were constantly in danger of forgetting. A crown on her head and a sceptre in her hand would not have made her look otherwise than a contented every-day individual. It was not modest unconsciousness which was at the bottom of her merits, it was rather an incapacity of apprehending anything better than her own qualities. But Lucy was worth a great deal to Iris, and the solitary girl warmed into something of the pride and pleasure which the ball at home called for. The two girls were excitedly comparing notes on all the important items that belong to such an entertainment—surreptitiously inspecting the ball-room and supper-room—dwelling in delighted half-mystification on what was to be the distinguishing characteristic of the evening—fluttering from Iris's room to Lucy's to gaze upon this dress or that, and compare these flowers and those, and study the programme till they had it by heart.

‘It must be so nice for you to have a ball

at Lambford, dear,' said Lucy in all sincerity. 'You are the young lady of the house, and therefore the queen of the ball. It is for you to confer honour and bestow pleasure, though you may kindly share your good things. Won't you like it very much? I am so glad Lady Fermor thought of it at last.'

'Yes, it is kind of grandmamma,' said Iris, hesitating a little, with a momentary cloud coming over her small face. 'Of course I like to have a ball of my own, and to invite my friends. They are not very many—now that is one drawback,' she remarked quickly. 'Other girls are happy in loads of home relations and family friends. Where there is an affair of this kind, the house itself is overflowing with kindred near and remote. But grandpapa and grandmamma are old, and have outlived whole generations, and that makes a difference,' she broke off with a sigh.

She had conjured up a vision such as she had read of, rather than seen, of a girl with loving sisters and brothers, with a mother of whom she was proud, who held her child dear, and a father whom she could trust implicitly, who guarded her as the apple of his eye—a family who were among the salt of the earth,

whose friendship was coveted and prized by like-minded people, arriving in troops to take part in their festival.

‘But in that case you would not be the one queen, with an undisputed, undivided sovereignty. I know there are girls who hate the idea of rivals, even in their own family, and are ready to be thankful that they have no sisters to come in and claim any portion of the attention that falls to their share. But there is no use in speaking of them, for I know you are not a bit like them. As for myself, I must say I should not care to be without King Lud, and Susan, and Georgie, and the rest—not to say without the poor dear father and mother—to be handed back to a former generation. I have not more than one grandmother living, the kindest granny in the world, at Birkett, you know, Iris,’ said the literal Lucy. ‘But it’s the will of Providence, and we must all submit to the will of Providence,’ she quoted glibly from her stereotyped speeches by cottage sick-beds and in the Sunday-school. ‘We ought to make the best of things, and to feel contented and cheerful, as I know you do, Iris. Only I don’t know why you let your deprivations—we all have our deprivations—

it would not be good for us if we had not—crop up on the afternoon of your ball. You are not badly off for a birthday treat this year, and I do hope that Mr. and Mrs. Mildmay behave well to you.’

Iris winced a little at this suggestion, even from Lucy Acton. Neither of the girls knew a great deal of the old, miserable embroilments of the family, but they were acquainted with the general outline—that Tom Mildmay was the son of Lord Fermor’s younger brother, who had, further, married a sister of the first Lady Fermor. It was understood that there had been an entire breach between the two branches of the family for many years, and that though young Mildmay submitted to a patched-up reconciliation for his own interest, he looked with hostile eyes, under his cold courtesy, on Lady Fermor and all her belongings. Iris, though she was his cousin once removed, was also Lady Fermor’s granddaughter and heiress. In the last light she was likely to contest with Mr. Mildmay such money as the old Lord could ‘will away,’ either with or from the entailed estate. When it is further taken into consideration that Tom Mildmay was a married man and the father of

a family, that he had only the modest income of a moderately successful barrister, tacked on to Lord Fermor's allowance to his heir-at-law, wherewith to maintain his household, it may be argued that he would have been more than human if he had been able to entertain a strong regard for Iris. Perhaps it was to the credit of both that, in their formal intercourse, he could preserve towards her a species of neutrality.

‘My dear Lucy, there is not a fault to be found with the Mildmays’ behaviour, unless, indeed, they behave too well,’ replied Iris hastily. ‘They are never off their good behaviour, as people sometimes say of children, with rather a stand-off result, to be sure.’

‘Then you ought to be satisfied,’ Lucy hastened to say, with a tone of sensible, affectionate reproach. ‘You should not spoil your grand birthday ball with crying for the moon, and raising up bugbears of trials and troubles.’

‘I don’t mean to spoil anything,’ insisted Iris, still a little ruefully. ‘But it is not my birthday ball—that is another contradiction; my birthday was on the 29th of June, as you remembered, when you sent me that pretty,

kind card. I spent it all alone without even you to speak to ; grandpapa was lying at his worst, grandmamma would not come down, and she did not care for me to go up and help her to nurse him. But I did try to submit and make the best of things. It was a lovely day, and I had a new book which I cared for, and took with me into the woods. Fancy how delightful they were while they were still fresh and full of flowers, and all the birds were singing ! Mrs. Pole had baked a cake for my express benefit, and Susan and Georgie ran over to inquire for grandpapa, in time for afternoon tea, and helped me to eat it. Then we heard poor grandpapa was better, and had enjoyed some hours of refreshing sleep. I am not sure whether a ball like this which we are going to have, would have made me so very much happier on my real birthday than I was after all.'

'That is going to the opposite extreme and talking nonsense still,' said Lucy briskly. 'I won't have you grow unsocial ; but it is more likely you will have your little head turned with the compliments and flattery and all that sort of thing which you will be receiving presently. My chief concern about the ball's

not being on your birthday, is whether it is quite right to call it a birthday ball when it isn't,' debated Lucy with her judicial, puritanical air, which she had acquired betimes from her early career as a clergywoman, while it was at the same time perfectly honest, like everything else about her. Then she solved the difficulty like a loyal gentlewoman and daughter of the Church of England, 'Well, the Queen very often keeps her birthday on the wrong day.' She got rid of her doubt on the instant, and turned to another consideration. 'It is rather a pity that it is later in the season than the 29th of June, for then it was moderately cool, while the 30th of July is really too hot for anything save a garden-party. I wonder Lady Fermor did not change the ball into a garden-party, Iris.'

'She was set on the ball and had made her arrangements; besides, I fancy garden-parties were not so common when she was young. However, we are to have something of the kind too, and you will be there, Lucy. Mind you must not cheat us of our due, and escape to a mothers' meeting, or a cottage-reading at the other end of the parish. The Mildmays have half consented to stay and go, and Lady

Thwaite is to preside, though it was grand-mamma's idea, and I believe it was her influence which brought it about.'

'I am not going to make any difficulty; I am not often in such request,' said Lucy merrily. 'I enjoy a treat just as much as the school-children do. But you have never told me where this one is to be.'

'At Whitehills, at Sir William Thwaite's,' said Iris composedly. 'He is to have the second cutting of hay in the water meadows just beyond the park, to-morrow. We are all to go down after luncheon to look on at the hay-making, and I suppose to help also, if we have a weakness for playing at Daphnes and Chloes. Lady Thwaite is to give us tea in her old drawing-room. Poor soul! I dare say she will not like it, though she can laugh and carry off her troubles as well as most people. The Rector thinks she has behaved beautifully to Sir William, though, as you say, we all have our deprivations. Oh, Lucy!' went on Iris, in the rambling manner of a person who is saying everything that is crowding into her head—without stopping to classify the materials—on one of the rare occasions when she had a friend's ears to pour

it into. 'I should not be surprised if the Hollises were there. Grandmamma will take care that they have an invitation. I think the hay-making will help us to subside gracefully into our usual soberness. I have only been at two or three balls before, and I confess I felt headachy and dawdling and do nothing, for days after the ball.'

Lucy had heard the name of the host, and of his local habitation, with a modified 'Oh!'

She was too busy a girl to be quite familiar with all the last confident gossip which served to confirm idle guesses and audacious prognostications. But she knew enough to have put it, in so many words, to any other girl as intimate with her as Iris Compton, whether she were going to marry Sir William Thwaite, taking it for granted that it was by Lady Fermor's desire and according to her arrangement. But somehow Lucy could not ask such a question of Iris Compton. Girls, especially fairly educated, well-bred girls, may be very good friends, without (if some men will forgive the exception) exchanging love-confidences. In this case there was none to exchange. Iris had none; and if she had, the greater depth and delicacy of her nature would

have made her shy of confiding it, till the very last moment, to her dearest friend. Lucy went so far as to complain laughingly of presuming curates, while she was still so popular among them, and so helpful to them, that Iris shook her head privately, and feared selfishly that Lucy must fall a victim to one of her court of clerical squires at last. But Lucy was steady and conscientious, and till the right man came, she was above either entering on petty flirtations for their own sake, or with the sillier intent of inflicting their rise and progress, scrapes and catastrophes, on an unfortunate bosom-friend.

It seemed only the other day that Iris and Lucy Acton had speculated, with the rest of their world, on the anomaly of a clownish squire at Whitehills, and asked each other if he would be fit to enter a drawing-room, and how they should shake hands with him when he might swing their arms like the hands of a pendulum or crush their rings into their fingers. What should they find to say to him, especially if they wished to propitiate him—supposing Lucy sought a subscription for her pet cottage hospital or any one of her missions, and Iris was solicitous to abet her?

When brought to the test the difficulty had not proved so insurmountable to a girl with an exceptionally tender heart and single mind. But Lucy had only an inkling of this, while it struck her that Sir William's name was constantly coming up in the conversation.

On Iris's tablets, which were not left clean ivory, it was recorded that she was to have Mr. Hollis for her first partner, while Mr. Mildmay was to dance with Mrs. Hollis. This was a piece of county etiquette. Iris, again, was to waltz the first waltz with Tom Mildmay as a piece of family etiquette.

'And I hope you will give the third dance to King Lud,' suggested Lucy, using her brother Ludovic's family nickname.

'No, nothing quite so good,' answered Iris. 'I am to have Sir William for my third partner.'

'But can he dance? are you sure?' urged Lucy, in alarm for the consequences. 'Will he not trample on your toes till they are like a jelly, or tear your skirt to tatters?'

'Oh no!' answered Iris, laughing fearlessly. 'At least grandmamma vouches for him, and scouts at any doubt. It is only a quadrille, so that I cannot come to great grief. But I

don't think he would attempt what he knew nothing about. He has sense and observation. You must remember I have seen a good deal of him since grandmamma has received him into high favour. I have not seen her make so much of anybody for a long time; she keeps him mostly to herself, but occasionally I have to talk to him, or play to him, or take a turn with him on the terrace. It is not nearly so awkward and uncomfortable, or so much of a drag as we feared. I believe he is rather a nice fellow. Plain? Oh! without any pretence, homely, and not particularly bright, though it is hard to judge of a man brought up quite differently from ourselves. He never drinks anything save water, because he promised to a friend that he would not touch strong drink. Then you know Jenny Rogers, the little table-maid out of your class, whom I like so much? she tells me that she has a brother a groom up at Whitehills; since the rain and heat he has been attacked with rheumatic fever, and Dr. Snell is attending him at the Whitehills offices. Sir William goes to see Bill Rogers every day, and lifts him in his arms, as if he were the servant and Bill the master. He offered to read to him to

ease the pain and help to pass the time, just as he has read the newspapers to grandmamma during a fit of her gout. The book was to be what the lad liked, but he had no choice, so that Sir William took over 'Tom Brown's School-days,' which I had told him to get, when we happened one day to speak of boys' sports. I am so proud of having mentioned it, because he said it was first-rate. I declare,' said Iris impulsively, with her sweet smile, 'I am falling quite in love with poor Sir William, though he is a rough diamond. His eyes are like a woman's, or like a dumb animal's when it is trying to make itself understood.'

It was a frank announcement, which did not sound promising, and Lucy did not mistake it for a moment.

Lady Fermor had ordered a dress for her grand-daughter from a court dressmaker, and the old lady turned out certain jewels from her jewel-case for Iris to wear. Had the girl known their history, the thought of it would have burnt into her pure, just soul as if the jewels were red-hot and scorching her tender flesh; but Iris did not know, and her ignorance was more than bliss, it was unsullied righteousness.

Lady Fermor had spared nothing for the occasion. She had even condescended to consult Lady Thwaite on what novel luxury, elegance, or eccentricity would bestow *éclat* on the ball. Formerly Lady Fermor's attempts in this direction had tended to aristocratic, but rather riotous orgies. She now sought to establish a different character for Iris's ball, and so was willing to compete for another more subdued and subtle distinction. She was asking the suffrages of the neighbours, and she made a concession to their prejudices to the extent of letting it be known that Miss Compton's ball was to be a ball pure and simple. There was to be no cosy room with green tables to attract stragglers from the chalked floors. For once play was abjured at Lambford.

Lady Thwaite had suggested a foreign fashion of dancing the cotillon. It certainly called for expensive accessories, but it might be new in Eastham, though it had been ridden to death half-a-dozen seasons ago in London, and had fallen back in a great measure on its native ground of French and Austrian ball-rooms. But Lady Thwaite could think of nothing better as a surprise to tickle and

charm the natives, and Lady Fermor adopted the device.

Iris and Lucy met to put the finishing-touches to each other's toilets. Iris's costume was made up of white silk, tulle, and lilies, with long grassy leaves. It might have been looked down upon as insipid, tame, and old-fashioned by the man-milliner Worth and his prostrate American and English worshippers, but she had never worn anything so befitting her youth and beauty. As she looked at herself in the long mirror, her face beamed with girlish gladness at her own fair image. It beamed still more brightly, though bashfully, when Lucy cried out in honest exultation, 'Iris, dear, you look—I won't say how you look,' for she knew Iris, however pleased by her friendly admiration, would still feel affronted if she were told to her face that she was beautiful. 'Your dress is charming. Madame deserves her reputation and her prices,' with a little sigh, for poor Lucy—one of the many children of a much-hampered clergyman—had to be satisfied with an old pink silk of her mother's which had seen much service, but was still supposed to pass muster when covered with fresh tarlatan.

‘I am so happy you like everything about me,’ said Iris, with her soft blushes; ‘but if love were not blind, you would see that all is needed where there is a face like a Queen Anne’s sixpence, and a big bump to be concealed by real thatch,’ and she stirred with her forefinger the silken tangle above the disproportionate forehead.

The next moment Iris forgot herself in inventing improvements on Lucy’s dress. She would gladly have given her friend a new gown for the occasion, while Lucy and her mother would not have been too proud to accept the gift. But Iris, though a prospective heiress, had little more pocket-money at her disposal than Lucy possessed. Neither was Iris at liberty to transfer for a night one of the diamonds glittering at her throat and waist, and on the band passed through her hair. It was only her love, taste, and skill, and a few perishing flowers, which Iris could lavish on her friend. But Iris looped up here, and gathered together there, and festooned with ferns and *Géant de bataille* roses, till Lucy protested with gratification she would not have known her gown, and that Iris had far too clever fingers for anybody save a dressmaker.

‘When all other trades fail, I shall try dressmaking, Lucy,’ promised Iris.

‘Yes, but there must come a revolution first,’ objected conservative Lucy.

‘There is not much of you, but we have made the most of it,’ said Lady Fermor, when Iris went to show herself. The mistress of Lambford spoke from the superbness of her purple velvet and ermine, which only royalty, condemned to wear robes of state, or eighty years of age, with an icy finger on its veins, could have borne on a July night after the Goodwood races had sounded the retreat to the rear-guard of fashion from suffocating London rooms. ‘See that *you* do the best for yourself, child,’ said the ancient oracle, ‘and make your hay when the sun shines. Don’t be such a fool as to think you are everybody’s bargain, and lose the only chance that may fall to your lot.’

Iris was accustomed to her grandmother’s speeches. She had got into the habit of not stopping to analyze them when they held anything enigmatical. Where was the good of pulling words to pieces in order to find beneath them gall and wormwood, ashes, golden powder from the great image of Mammon,

stamped small and strewn on the water which men and women were to drink for their daily refreshment?

The little-used ball-room at Lambford was one of the finest, least-spoilt rooms in the house. Iris's taste and dexterous fingers had been there too in the decorations. She had laughed to herself as she indulged in her little spurt, at the æsthetic mania with which she was so familiar from her studies of *Punch* and the other illustrated papers. She had introduced the great tawny discs of sunflowers and shields of peacocks' feathers among the drapery of ivy, Virginian creeper, and clematis. 'Even Punch, and Toby, and "the Colonel," of whom one has read, would own the effect was good if they were here to-night.'

CHAPTER XV.

IRIS WITH THE BALL AT HER FOOT.

THE guests, though there was a shade of shyness and stiffness about them at first, because they were conscious of replacing a different company, did not disgrace the scene. True, Mrs. Mildmay was more colourless than ever in her pale grey satin. She would have liked, if she had dared, to have her gown black, and to wear no ornaments but her pearls, which might have stood for congealed tears of reluctance and consternation. She drew Mr. Mildmay aside into the conservatory, and begged him to tell her which were the least objectionable people present. She got into a scure, and pointed out the Hollis's party as certainly disreputable.

‘My dear Amelia,’ replied the harassed gentleman, ‘it is quite right that you should

be particular about the company you keep, no husband worthy of the name could blame his wife for being careful on such an important point. But for heaven's sake don't go into a panic and do yourself and me irreparable injury. Remember this is to be our future home, and these are to be our neighbours. There is nothing wrong with anybody here to-night, unless it be that stout, bottle-nosed man in the corner, whom there is not the slightest occasion for you to notice. Lady Fermor knows better than to have us down to countenance her old associates;' and the small, pompous man, who was to be the future Lord Fermor, spread out his chest, and brushed up his flaxen hair, which was in a higher top than usual, and drew his fingers through the 'Piccadilly weepers' of his long moustache and beard. 'Besides, the old woman is not such a fool as to compromise that girl and the lout on whom she is to be bestowed. I wish they would take themselves farther off than Whitehills, certainly; but the rank-and-file Baronet may be more easily dealt with than a finer gentleman. Now, just to show you how much you may be mistaken, and how near you may go to impairing our future comfort

here, the very people you have singled out as objectionable are the most unexceptionable in the whole room, so far as birth, fortune, and irreproachable antecedents go.'

'You don't say so, Thomas!'

'Fact, I assure you. Indeed, the family is so irreproachable that the present people must needs trade on their immunity from scandal, and begin to play pranks. Hollis is of a very old Eastham family, who have left their estates unencumbered—not the usual practice with the gentry here—neither will he impair them. He is an excellent man and admirable magistrate, though not so much master in his own house as he is on the bench. Mrs. Hollis had a large fortune and is equally well descended—she is nearly related to the Marquis of Eastham's family—all of which is perhaps at the bottom of the mischief. I mean these people can do anything they like, and they, especially the young people among them, have chosen lately to revive many of the tricks and tomfooleries of a former generation. I cannot help thinking it is a pity, but there is no serious harm in it, and it must be overlooked in their case. You can see for yourself what thorough aristocrats these two pretty girls are,

though they have early shown themselves fond of making people stare.'

Tom Mildmay's definition of the Hollises was not a bad one. Either they and their actions were a singular relic remaining of the rudely healthy thoughtlessness, half-haughty hoydenishness and half-refined, half-barbarous horse-play of their predecessors, or else the existence of these qualities was one sign amongst others that in the moral as in the physical revolutions of the world, we are constantly going back to a good deal that we were fain to hope we had outlived. Thus the puritanism of the Commonwealth was replaced by the licence of Charles II.'s reign, and the virtues of good King George III.'s court were replaced by the vices of the Regency, and so another honourable standard seems sinking before fastness and rowdyism in quarters where simple folk would least have expected to find them—before mammon-worship, fraudulent trading, vicious books, plays and music, and the worst French fashions, with scepticism and superstition walking hand in hand. At such eras old quips and cranks and odd traditional practices come to the front again. Such were the unbridled giddy love of fun—not ending

with boyhood or girlhood—and the feather-headed unscrupulous devotion to frolic for which nobody was responsible, that had distinguished the Marquis of Eastham's race when its members were contemporaries of the wits and bullies of the earlier Georgian chronicles. The same characteristics had reappeared strongly marked in the family lately. It was a remarkable testimony to the influence of blood and to the truism that there is nothing new under the sun, so that biography must repeat itself, to discover how decided the attributes were in a branch from the main line, consisting mostly of women, like the Hollises. For the sons were rarely at home, and Mr. Hollis, representing generally the sole male element in the family, had no quicksilver blood in his veins. In spite of his combined gravity and benevolence, he proved totally unable to cope with the hereditary tendency in his daughters.

Mrs. Hollis had laughed and grown fat, like Lady Thwaite. She was in a measure *hors de combat* where active sport was concerned. But she would not stand in the way of nonsense—which she enjoyed with the zest of the youngest engaged in it, or hinder her girls in their maddest escapades.

It was difficult to believe what these two stately-looking nymphs, certainly with roguery peeping out, now and again, from beneath the stateliness, had dared to do and to leave undone. All Eastham would have been up in arms against the culprits, if they had not been the Hollises, who might do anything.

Maudie and Nanny Hollis had dressed themselves like farmers' daughters, and driven a market cart through Cavesham, stopping at every door when required, measuring out and selling peas and early potatoes, blackberries and cherries, much as Sarah Jennings, the future Duchess of Marlborough, dispensed oranges, for a wager, in the streets of London.

The Misses Hollis were never out of their mail phaeton, during the summer, when they had a brother at home. They coaxed him to let one of the girls blow the horn, and the troop had been known to draw up, and invite each marvelling stray pedestrian they met to avail himself of their cattle and trap.

Sometimes zeal for the improvement of the human kind was engrafted on the family foible. The young ladies would arm themselves with a formidable array of brushes, brooms, and

pails, and force an entrance into a cottage closed for the day. Dainty hands would splash and sweep and souse with such good will, that the cottagers, returning from toilsome field-work, craving sluttish rest, would stand transfixed before a dwelling reeking and running down with cleanliness, and half-dried whitewash. Every chair and table had been ousted to undergo soaping and scrubbing; every cherished old secret hole, full of rubbish, stood gaping in emptiness, in the garish light of day. It never appeared to occur to the imperious, gleeful philanthropists what their feelings might have been if Thornbrake, with all their pet retreats, had been so assaulted, taken by storm, and well-nigh washed and swept off the face of the earth.

At another time it would be the children the girls would rout out of their hiding-places and hunt into the Hollises' school, which was under no officious, troublesome Board. There the young idea was taught to shoot in a wholly fitful and grotesque manner. According to the amateur schoolmistresses' moods they would set their small scholars such astounding lessons as no youthful brain could compass, which drove the juvenile fry and their

parents to the verge of despair. Or Nanny Hollis would undertake to enact the entire drama of 'Punch and Judy' for the benefit of the assembly.

Withal, the Hollises were kind-hearted in their heedlessness. It was a rarer event than thoughtful people might have feared, for the girls to turn upon their victims and, after teasing, tempting, and confounding them, either toss them aside or trample them under foot, in impatience with anyone's being so silly as not to know his or her place, or in the high-spirited experimenters' eagerness to find some other jolly game. Whole and half-sovereigns of the Hollises, which to be sure they never missed, were continually finding a way into Lucy Acton's or her father's purse, so as to salve, in the people's day of distress, what wounds had been dealt to the pride which still survived in the stolid day-labourers, and doltish, unskilled mechanics of Eastham.

Nanny and Maudie Hollis were the most simply dressed girls in the room, but for the gleam of some of their mother's jewels, to which Lady Fermor's ill-gotten gems had been nothing. The sisters sat demurely by

Mrs. Hollis's side, and it was only those that knew the madcaps best, who entertained an unerring apprehension that the long, sleepy-looking eyes—the true Eastham eyes, under the well-pencilled brows, were glancing out from beneath their lids in search of prey.

Lady Thwaite's weeds had passed gracefully into black satin and bugles, and a Queen Mary cap. She had fulfilled what had been expected of her. She had brought with her a train of young nephews, and nieces, and cousins, to whom any ball was welcome. She was sincere in seeking that neither Miss Compton's ball, nor the great *coup* which Lady Thwaite had herself inaugurated, should prove a fiasco; only if either did she was not called upon to cry over it. She was easy in her mind with respect to hedging, so far as any woman could perform that prudent, manly measure, where the ball and any results that might follow the ball were in question.

The officers from Birkett had appeared to a man, and Lady Thwaite was taking some of those she knew into her confidence about her special part of the programme. When the best that could be brought forward was said of Sir William, he was not the man who could

be chosen with any prospect of a successful issue—nay, with anything save trembling apprehension—to figure as a master of the ceremonies in a *jeu-de-société*. There he stood, half-hidden among a knot of men at one of the doors, so that though many an eye was turned upon him, and many a whisper breathed his name, he did not suffer from an overwhelming consciousness of observation. He could pass muster, tugging at his gloves, in his well-fitting dress-coat, with the camellia which Lady Fermor had herself picked for him, stuck in his button-hole.

Iris had danced with Mr. Hollis, and received the kindest encouragement from the white-bearded, indulgent, too indulgent master of Thornbrake, whom his wife and daughters set at nought, coaxed and laughed at as ‘poor old dad,’ and ‘Peter,’ whereas he was not a descendant of the old Hollises for nothing, and his Christian name in reality was ‘Adrian.’

Iris had waltzed her punctilious waltz with her cousin till, before the three rounds were ended, she felt alarmingly infected by his solemnity. She was glad to exchange her partner for Sir William, who went through

the quadrille to the admiration of the sceptical and the credit of his dancing-master, though not without some loss of equanimity.

‘Poor man,’ Iris secretly compassionated him, ‘how pale he has grown! surely the game is not worth the candle.’ At the same time she darted a triumphant challenge of the eyes to Lucy. ‘Shall I introduce them?’ Iris pondered. ‘Of course the Rector has called, and Sir William knows some of the family, but I think this is the first time he has happened to meet Lucy, and she has been sitting for the last dance. He would not be a bad partner if he would appear to forget what he is doing, and not leave his partner to find all the small-talk. He looks as well as any man present. I am not sure he does not look better. His figure is not at all bad, if it were not so bolt upright; then he has got quite beautiful eyes, and I like his chestnut hair. If Lucy were very captivating she might pave the way for a handsome subscription to her Cottage Hospital. He could afford it, for grand-mamma is always saying what a fine estate Whitehills is.’

Iris’s good intentions were nipped in the bud by Lady Thwaite’s claiming Sir William

and carrying him off in mystified reluctance to be presented to Maudie Hollis. This movement was the consequence of a short conversation which had passed between the two ladies.

‘Where is Orson, Lady Thwaite?’ inquired the younger. ‘You don’t tell me that he is dancing with Iris Compton? What next? He will be found able to read and write, and then he will be like everybody else; he will not be worth his salt.’

‘My dear child!’ exclaimed Lady Thwaite. She was a little nettled, for Sir William, though she could laugh at him when it suited her, was her late husband’s heir and her *protégé*. Like many women, when she was piqued she became specially affectionate with a sort of bitter-sweet affectionateness. Besides, she had known the Hollis girls all their lives, and felt free to take them to task. ‘I should not wonder, Maudie, though he were better read for a man than you are for a woman. Every class can command wonderful advantages now. Sir William had a fair elementary education, and he is a reading man.’

‘He may easily be better read than we are,’ said Maudie Hollis unblushingly, ‘if he has

gone beyond a few novels, which make me yawn all the time I am reading them, though they are said to be naughty, and it was rather good fun smuggling them into the house, under papa's nose, in the guise of histories and sermons. But Sir William Lumpkin is disappointing,' went on Maudie with a pout. 'What is the use of the fine story of the man's having been a private soldier, if he is to be just like every other partner we meet? But I mean to give him another chance. Won't you introduce him, Lady Thwaite?'

'Certainly.'

Lady Thwaite brought him over, and, to her gratification, Sir William went through the introduction with a coolness which would have been miraculous had it not admitted of an explanation. The well-filled room contained only one woman for Sir William Thwaite, and that woman was Iris Compton. To dance with her was rapture and torment, in which former scenes came flashing back to taunt, cow, and sicken him. To every other woman there he was profoundly indifferent, and indifference in certain instances lends ease, freedom, even a species of distinction to the manner. But Sir William did not imme-

diately avail himself of the privilege of asking Maudie Hollis to dance. He stood looking a little as if he wondered what he had been brought there to do, till she suggested that she was dying to waltz to the particular air which the orchestra was playing.

‘Then hadn’t we better try it?’ he said, and whirled her round carefully and correctly.

‘Orson’s a humbug,’ she whispered to her sister, when the couple stood still to rest, and Nanny Hollis with her partner stopped beside them. ‘There is not a rise to be got out of him. I think the Field-Marshal should make an investigation what the men who take the Queen’s shilling are really drilled in—the goose-step or waltzing. If he had been a Scotchman, and we had stood up in a reel, I could have understood it; I believe Scotch children are born dancing reels, and only need the sound of the bagpipes to make them skip and whoop like red Indians. But a waltz! Yet, I assure you, there is nothing at all odd in his waltzing. Why, I thought we should be the spectacle of the room, and I might be reduced to spraining my ankle or fainting to put an end to it, and he only touches me as if I were glass, and lets me go when he has the

opportunity. I wonder what Iris Compton sees in him? But you can try him, if you like. I dare say Captain Ryder will not object to change partners, and Orson may think it is the rule in our set. Then Peter will be pleased to see us both dance with Sir William, though the worthy soul has no notion of match-making.'

'Of course not,' answered Nanny. 'Peter only thinks we are good, polite children, to dance with everybody who asks us, and not to affront a stuck recruiting sergeant.'

In the meantime Iris had been allowed to follow her inclination and waltz with her fast friend, Ludovic Acton, as they had waltzed together hundreds of times before, since the juvenile days when they disputed hotly about their steps, and she asserted that he trod on her toes, while he retorted that she had nearly pulled his arms off.

Lieutenant Ludovic had developed into a big and incomprehensible fellow, comely, like his sister Lucy, but with more individuality in the comeliness, which defied and conquered a mass of material, for he was big, with sandy hair and moustache, and an inclination to chubbiness in his cheeks. At home he was

the gentlest and most inoffensive of male beings, the most dutiful and affectionate of sons and brothers, whose principal weakness displayed itself in a passion for musical instruments of a languishing and die-away description. He never came home from foreign service without bringing back a new flute or mandolin. It would have been his joy to have played accompaniments to his mother's and sisters' performances on the old piano all day long. It was his sorrow that with all the will in the world to oblige the family's darling, they had so little time to avail themselves of his powers. Sometimes Iris Compton did duty for the defaulters; her grandmother had, however, passed an interdict against her making herself 'notorious' by frequent strummings with that musical fool, the Rector's son.

But no sooner had Ludovic rejoined his ship than the most extraordinary reports reached the Rectory and his neighbours regarding him. The mild strumming fellow was all but blown up by his forwardness in torpedo practice. He had leapt overboard in the happy hunting-ground of sharks, and risked his valuable life twice over to save a

wretched Malay woman. He had volunteered to take the command of a boat on an exploring expedition among the ice near the North Pole. And when the crew landed on a frost-bound coast, and on false information took a journey over the snow, which was likely to be their last, he left the exhausted, despairing men huddled together in their hut, and made an awful journey back alone. He crossed the wild white waste, with no companion save an Esquimaux dog, and no sound to break the stillness of death but the roar of a bear, the bay of a wolf, or the scream of a bald-headed eagle.

These performances were certainly removed by an immeasurable distance from any experience which his home and native place had of King Lud; and he was so hurt and indignant if anybody ventured to approach the subject that his familiars were driven to the verge of doubting whether he could really be the hero of the exploits which were put in his name. Had they not rather been performed by some gallant young man who was unaccountably defrauded of his due, while Ludovic Acton, as his manner seemed to imply, had, by an absurd mistake, been falsely accredited with the glory? In spite of the

bewilderment which attended on the young man's honours, King Lud was justly the pride of his father's and mother's hearts, and the idol of his sisters. Iris Compton, too, was proud and fond of him. She had only escaped a deeper feeling because of the familiarity which paralyzes the imagination, and because one of the finest fellows in the world did not happen to entertain any deeper feeling for her.

All the difference which the advance from boy and girlhood to young man and womanhood had made in the relations between Ludovic Acton and Iris Compton was, that after frequent separations and renewals of intercourse, the couple had succeeded in accomplishing the effort, as a tribute to social forms, to address each other in public as Mr. Acton and Miss Compton, instead of King Lud and Iris.

Therefore Sir William, with his unmasked face, need not have looked every time he passed the pair as if he would enjoy swearing 'like a trooper,' according to Maudie Hollis's graphic description. Even if he had heard their conversation, so primitive a fellow might have felt elated rather than depressed by it.

‘Don’t you think Sir William Thwaite waltzes very nicely?’ said Iris, looking with approving eyes on the waltzer. ‘Oh! I hope Lucy sees him.’

Ludovic had been interrupted in an enthusiastic account he was giving of a zither. He did not dream of resenting his partner’s lapse of interest in his conversation; but he looked at her a little curiously in his quiet way. ‘A lady is the best judge of a fellow’s waltzing,’ he said cautiously, pulling his fawn-coloured moustache; ‘but if you ask me—I should not have presumed to offer any criticism, mind, if you had not put it to me—I should say the gentleman is just a trifle laboured in his performance, and occupied with it. No doubt art will soon become second nature.’

‘Now, Mr. Acton, that is very ill-natured of you, particularly as we are speaking of dancing, not of singing, or playing on the banjo,’ said Iris saucily; ‘and I do not know what you mean by professing not to presume to give me an opinion till it is solicited.’

‘Don’t you?’ responded King Lud dubiously; ‘but may I inquire what Lucy has to do with it?’

‘Yes, Lucy was so conceited as to imagine

Sir William could not dance at all—Sir William who is waltzing like—like Lord Palmerston when grandmamma saw him at Almack's.'

'Hold on, Miss Compton; I don't object to a spice of friendly exaggeration, and I don't wish to find fault. What's in waltzing after all? The best of men may not figure as the most graceful of waltzers. I am afraid I am a little heavy myself.'

'I am afraid you are,' acknowledged Iris, with all the candour of easy-going friendship.

'Sir William waltzes more like his dancing-master, whoever he may have been, and whether or not he is still pointing the light fantastic toe. The man is as solemn and earnest over his task as if he were earning his bread by it.'

'I don't believe he ever had a dancing-master,' said Iris in her ignorance, with a gay laugh. 'I think he waltzes by nature—so well that you are tempted to be jealous of him, just as he is a gentleman by nature, to a greater extent than many people suppose.'

It was just after this dance that Iris had her eyes opened and the ball utterly spoilt for her. The operation of having euphrasy squeezed on

the eye-lids may be always beneficial—as truth, if we can bear it, is always the best—it by no means follows that the act itself is not often exquisitely painful ; indeed, the occasions when it is supremely pleasant are the exceptions. Iris's enlightenment had no apparent connection with an awkward and distressing episode of the ball which had happened a little beforehand. The girl was out of the room when the unlucky blunder occurred, and she only heard a mangled version of it sometime afterwards. Nevertheless, the accident was partly the cause of Iris's having her eyes opened—in this as in many instances she suffered for the sins of others.

Lord Fermor had not walked since his last attack of illness, but he liked to be wheeled from room to room, to look at the company he could no longer join, and mumble greetings to any friend he recognised. Lady Fermor had directed that he should be wheeled once round the ball-room. The progress, though it disconcerted some of the guests, was made with apparent satisfaction to the poor old man, who glanced about with his lack-lustre eyes, and smiled a meaningless smile, till he came close to Lady Fermor where she sat at the top of

the room. She was preparing to accost him with one of her customary challenges, in the overpoweringly hilarious tones which she always adopted towards him.

‘How do you like it all, Fermor? The doings are a little slow, eh? The young folks have not the go they had when we were young.’

At that moment he anticipated her, a light came into his faded eyes and a tinge of life-blood into his clay-coloured cheeks. He succeeded in raising himself up, and stooped forward with an attempt at a low bow, at the same time fumbling to lay his yellow wax-like hand on his heart. He spoke in a quavering but perfectly audible voice. ‘Allow me to pay you my very best respects—my ardent homage. You must know it gives me the greatest pleasure in life to attend your assembly, Mrs. Bennet,’ he said, using a name which had not been mentioned in her hearing since she had dragged the shameful thing she had made it through the mire.

Even she grew ghastly at the unfamiliar sound, and quailed for an instant, when her sin found her out after half a century, by the fatuous brain and babbling lips of the partner who had continued devoted to her.

Everybody within hearing looked at each other in dismay, and poor Mrs. Mildmay was so appalled that her husband had to hurry her away in search of instant restoratives, lest she should groan aloud or faint on the spot.

The next moment Lady Fermor had signed to the servant who was wheeling the chair to move on, had pulled herself together, looked round defiantly, and startled her next neighbour by asking her how she liked the new fashion of puffed sleeves, like pillows with strings tied round them.

But there was a disturbing impression produced at the worst time, for there was a lull in the dancing, while the gentlemen whom Lady Thwaite, as mistress of the ceremonies for Lady Fermor, had deputed to be *aides-de-camp* were assuming their steward's bows and ribands, and consulting together about the bringing on the *pièce de resistance*.

Lady Thwaite wished to get rid of the sense of something wrong and to dissipate an uneasy qualm of conscience on her own account. Besides, she was a woman born to meddle, incapable of letting well alone, unless in her own private concerns, which she treated with the greatest respect and discretion. She

caught Iris as she was coming back into the ball-room, withdrew her from her partner, and took possession of her, to have a little confidential chat in a cool corridor which was then deserted.

‘What is it, Lady Thwaite?’ inquired Iris without a shade of apprehension, unless for the small trouble indicated in her next words. ‘Oh! I hope nothing is going to put a stop to the cotillon. The bouquets and foolscaps have not gone amissing? Nobody is too bashful? Captain Hood has not begun to doubt his power to act as fogleman?’

‘No, no; but I have hardly spoken to you to-night, my dear Iris, not even to congratulate you, if I may venture——’

‘On my ball?’ Iris finished the sentence. ‘Well, I do think it is going off delightfully in spite of the heat, and that everybody is happy. I am beginning to be sorry it is half over; I did not enjoy my other balls nearly so much, though you were very kind,’ ended Iris, with a little sigh of content.

‘I am so glad you find this ball especially charming; I am not surprised. But you did not quite take me up. It was not on the ball I thought of wishing you joy—may I not do

it on something else?' said Lady Thwaite caressingly.

'On what else should you wish me joy?' inquired Iris wonderingly. 'I dare say it is very stupid of me, but I do not in the least know what you mean. I think I am stupid to-night, for I have been two or three times puzzled by things people have said, or rather left half-said. Ludovic Acton, among the rest, professed not to presume to give his opinion on something we were talking about. I must have grown, unknown to myself, a grand, imposing person all at once.'

'You are not stupid, and you have only grown grander by anticipation—you are merely modest, a rare quality, let me tell you, nowadays, and perhaps a little shy. But I must warn you, my love, shyness is not always wise where serious interests—the happiness of two people's lives—are at stake,' she added with an air of matronly wisdom, and a tone of friendly caution. 'Shyness may be misunderstood in certain cases and cause irreparable mischief.'

'What can you mean, Lady Thwaite?' cried Iris, provoked into standing still, with her cheeks hot and scarlet, and a sparkle and ring

of justifiable vexation in her eyes and voice. 'You speak as if there were somebody when there is nobody—nobody in the world. Not a soul has a right to say so, or to talk to me about it; though I hope I should have the sense and good feeling to let any friend talk to me for my good, if there were a shadow of reason for it. Mr. Acton, if you mean him,' continued Iris incoherently, 'though I cannot think why, unless because he is Lucy's brother, and we have always been intimate friends—they have all been kind to me since I was a baby at the Rectory—but we shall never be anything more than friends—we have never either of us had the most distant idea of—I should be so sorry, and I am afraid grand-mamma would be very angry, if anything without the smallest foundation were said.'

'Don't trouble yourself—there is no fear of it,' said Lady Thwaite, with the faintest sarcasm in her tone, and continuing the unruffled smiling serenity of her scrutiny; 'what is the proper word for what old-fashioned people used to call "close"? Does your grandmother never say, as characters in novels were wont to do, "My dear girl, you are very close"?'

Lady Thwaite could not in any sense be

termed a bad woman. She was not cruel or treacherous or even tyrannical in her selfishness, and she had a genuine liking for Iris Compton; but she no more understood her than she could have understood the inhabitant of another world. Iris thought that either Lady Thwaite was taking leave of her senses, or that she had gone out of the way to insult her, which in itself would have been a witless as well as an unprecedented piece of aggression. For Iris was not aware of having offended her inquisitor, who had been formerly her friendly patroness, while the girl had never imagined herself insulted before.

‘I am almost a relation,’ went on Lady Thwaite, with her exasperatingly cheerful reproachfulness, ‘at least a most interested family connection.’

Iris had been standing staring at the speaker, now she started with a gasp. ‘Lady Thwaite, you cannot mean Sir William, to whom grandmamma has been kind; and I have tried to be kind to him too, though of course I have nothing in my power. What do you take us for? He would never make such a dreadful mistake.’

‘Iris,’ said Lady Thwaite, thoroughly ex-

cited, 'it is not other people who have been making mistakes ; it is you who are—a perfect simpleton I had almost said, forgive me for such plain speaking—a greater child than I could have conceived possible. All the people here to-night are talking of your marriage with Sir William Thwaite almost as an accomplished fact. What is more, Lady Fermor has arranged the match. She has spoken of it to me. Sir William himself is looking for the fulfilment of the expectations which have been held out to him. It is right that you should know the truth, if you have never suspected it before.'

'And was I to have no voice in my own marriage? What is there about me, what have I done, that people should see fitness in such a marriage? Would grandmamma give me to one of the servants, to a rude, ignorant working-man?'

Lady Thwaite was touched by the misery in the girl's face, and by the self-restraint which prevented her from expressing it, save by the unconscious tightening of every muscle—so that the eyebrows grew contracted and the little mouth drawn—and by the involuntary clenching of her hand on one of

the white roses of the bouquet, till the flower was crushed, and the petals fell unheeded to the ground. But Lady Thwaite was also provoked and indignant. ‘My dear Iris, I am very sorry. If I had dreamt that you would be so distressed, I should certainly not have spoken to-night and spoilt your pleasure, though it is high time somebody spoke to prevent a great *esclandre*. But, pardon me, you are speaking very foolishly in what you imply of Sir William. He is not to be mentioned in the same breath with an ordinary working-man. No doubt, his branch of the family had been permitted to sink into obscurity, so that he was brought up very plainly; but he was still a Thwaite of White-hills. For my part I think he showed his origin by preferring the army to any small trade, and I believe he proved himself a brave soldier. You know we have all accepted him, and given him his place among us. Every year that passes will see him in greater harmony with his position. I am convinced he is a rough diamond, with many admirable qualities, as men go. He is young, fairly good-looking—I may say rather handsome than the reverse—manly, honest. You know

he is as temperate as an anchorite' (with an irrepressible smile). 'He attends church as regularly as if he were marched there by a commanding officer. He is kind—I have seen it with animals, and you yourself told me how good he has been to some sick servant. If you were as well acquainted with the world as I am, you would be aware that many, very many girls of your rank, whether they get their choice or not, have to go farther and fare worse, to put up with much heavier objections in their husbands than are involved in marrying poor Sir William.'

To Lady Thwaite's surprise Iris gave a little nervous laugh as her only protest. Lady Thwaite fancied it was in scorn, and she was annoyed at this exhibition of pride in a girl whom Lady Thwaite had imagined only too good, gentle, and docile.

But the laugh was more hysterical than scornful, though Iris was too healthy in body and mind, with too much native dignity and self-respect in her simplicity, to be guilty of pronounced hysterics. Only Lady Thwaite's words had vividly recalled to her mind a half-forgotten sentence which she herself had spoken of Sir William, when she had seen him

first, and said of him afterwards that he seemed 'a good sort of young man.' And Lady Fermor had protested impatiently such a report would have been very well if she had meant to hire him for a servant.

Yes, the recommendations which Lady Thwaite was citing were just the good character which one might get with a servant. The 'rather handsome than the reverse' might stand for the number of inches often required in a footman. For the rest—'honest, sober, obliging.' Was he obliging? Such kindness as he had displayed ought to represent good-natured consideration and readiness to please—in refraining from over-driving the horses, if he were the coachman, and in being found willing to help the other domestics.

The question was, whether the attributes of a good servant were quite those which a girl would look for in a husband, though it was true she might not fare the better as a wife for the lack of them.

Iris, in spite of the silence of her lips, had not been without her dream-husband, her ideal of true nobility, honour, grace, with every accomplishment for which she cared a straw. Compared to this ideal Sir William

Thwaite was a clown, and something worse, if he had so grossly misinterpreted her, and presumed on her friendliness towards him.

Lady Thwaite went on in spite of the unpropitious laugh: 'I think he was smitten with you at first sight. I am certain that he now worships the very ground you tread on. You could make almost anything of him. Would it not be worth your pains—a fit task for a girl so kind and unselfish as you are—to enable the poor Beast to break the spell of inadequate training and unfortunate associations, and see him rise the perfect prince of the fairy-tale? I remember, Iris, finding you, when you were a little girl, reading "Beauty and the Beast," and crying your eyes out for the poor, self-denying, forsaken Beast.'

'That was long ago,' said Iris, shaking her head. 'I know now that Beauty had her rights, no less than the Beast—in fact, that there are no such Beauties and Beasts.'

'Who would have expected cynicism from you? Was there not some old queen and saint who asserted her queenliness and saintship by christianizing and civilizing a bar-

barian of a husband, to whom my Sir William is a Paladin ?’

‘I am neither a queen nor a saint,’ answered Iris briefly; but she recollected instantly the whole story of St. Margaret, which Lady Thwaite had never read, and that Margaret’s royalty and saintliness did not save her from dying of the stab of exquisite anguish dealt by the bitter tidings that her old rustic wooer Malcolm and their first-born son had fallen together in the Northumbrian siege.’

‘I have only one word more to say,’ said Lady Thwaite, beginning to wonder at the zeal of her own pleading, when she was carried away by the spirit of the moment. ‘Lady Fermor is a very old woman; it is simply natural and right that she should be concerned for your future. I don’t wish to sadden you, love, but you will be a very lonely girl when she dies, and it is possible that she and Lord Fermor have not been able to make such an ample provision for you as the world supposes. There may be other reasons, which you are too young and do not know enough of the world to comprehend, why it would be specially desirable for you to marry early and well, as society judges marriages. Is it at all

surprising that your grandmother should wish to seize the opportunity of seeing you established at Whitehills? Though it is not above eight months since I lost poor Sir John, I think you must have forgotten what Whitehills is like,' remonstrated Lady Thwaite between warmth and plaintiveness. 'It is as well, perhaps, that you are to see it again to-morrow. I am not ashamed to confess that I was a proud woman when I came there first as its mistress. Whitehills, with a man who adores you—not at all a bad fellow, not vicious, or even superannuated, quite capable of becoming a respectable and respected county gentleman! Iris, think twice what you are about.'

'Thinking a hundred times would not make any difference,' retorted Iris, stung into passion, and proceeding, in her pain, to deal certain home-thrusts—of which she would have been incapable at a calmer moment—of whose point, in truth, she had little idea. 'I may be left a poor solitary girl—far poorer and more solitary than girls who have been brought up to earn their bread. I may have to bear reproach; I have not been so happy as to fail entirely in the knowledge of evil,

which will cling to me. And Whitehills may be a very grand place, with its mistress a most enviable woman. I dare say Sir William will not beat her, or prevent her from being a fine lady, though he is not a gentleman, and her friends will not forsake her. But for all that, I see no cause why I or any other girl should sell herself. That would be the lowest poverty, the most utter desolation of all, because it would be degradation and a lie.'

'Then I imagine you must be suffered to go your own way,' said Lady Thwaite a little loftily and angrily, 'since your notions are so impracticable. I hope you will never regret your resolution. You will allow me to say so,' she continued, recovering her temper. For it recurred to her again with greater force—why should she so press Sir William's suit? It would be nicer for her if he were longer in marrying—nay, if he never married at all—though what, in that case, would become of dear old Whitehills? To think that it should go a-begging! But now she would have the clearest conscience with regard to having done her best in seconding Sir William in the wish of his heart, though it

went a little against her convenience rather than her interest.

Even Bill Rogers might have owned that the dowager had done something to earn her pension. Under the renewed sense of what was best for herself—doubtless for her ‘cousin’ and Iris also—and under the full sunshine of an approving conscience, good-natured Lady Thwaite’s touch of indignation at Iris’s very tall notions and absurd unconvictionality vanished speedily.

‘Iris’—Lady Thwaite addressed her companion soothingly—‘don’t mind it too much; it cannot be helped. It is vexing; but most girls have troubles of the kind to encounter, sooner or later, and though they are trying they can be got over. Indeed, I am not sure whether any girl would like to be entirely without them—we are such contradictory mortals; we women especially. This is a free country, though there may be some difficulty with your grandmother, who cannot be expected to see with your eyes, and generally objects to being thwarted. However, I make no question that Sir William will take his *congé* like a man. But if I were you, my dear,

I should put him out of pain as quickly and humanely as possible. I am afraid he has deceived himself, and been deceived, without any fault of yours, while he may not stand being undeceived quite calmly just at first. Only don't frighten yourself. I dare say he will not go straightway to destruction, or even forget himself so far as to swear at you.'

Lady Thwaite was laughing now ; but though Iris felt hurt by this rapid transition to a light mood, as by everything else in the discussion, her wounded pride did not prevent her from more nearly breaking down than she had yet shown. She could have implored Lady Thwaite to stay the *dénouement*, to save everybody from an explanation which could only be painful. If Lady Thwaite were right, which Iris to this moment doubted, with the doggedness of affront and mortification, and the utmost recoil from the next stage of the farce—surely it was a farce, not a tragedy—would not Lady Thwaite tell Sir William it could not be? She, Iris, was very sorry ; but the suggestion was monstrous. Well, if that would be too strong an epithet, the thing was not to be thought of for a

moment. Sir William would take Lady Thwaite's word for his dismissal, and there would be an end of it. Lady Fermor could not say anything if he withdrew of his own accord.

Iris was saved from an entreaty which must have been refused, by the arrival of a servant, with an urgent request that Lady Thwaite and Miss Compton would return to the ball-room immediately. The second part of the programme, the cotillon, which was to give speciality to the ball, was about to begin, but it could not be started in the absence of the two ladies.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COTILLON.

LADY THWAITE was more sorry than ever for having interfered at so inopportune a time, though she had the consolation, which was great to a woman of her character, of knowing now exactly how matters stood.

‘Are you quite able for it, Iris?’ she inquired kindly. ‘Would you like to wait here a little longer, or to go to your own room for a few minutes? Shall I send to say the cotillon must be put off for another half-hour? It will not matter much, though the supper-hour is coming on.’

But whatever kind of home Lambford had proved to Iris, it had not been a nursery of self-indulgence. The place had not been without its bracing elements. She pulled herself together, slight young girl that she was, as a strong man might have done, and

after putting her hand to her head for a moment, she answered : 'No, thank you ; where would be the good ? I must not keep everybody waiting and disappoint people ;' and then she held up her drooping head and walked like a young queen back to the ball-room.

Lady Thwaite had never admired her so much. 'She is too good for him and such a fate,' she said to herself, for her abiding conviction was that the marriage was merely a thing of time. Lady Fermor would prevail eventually, as when had she not prevailed ? Otherwise what would become of Iris, poor girl, in spite of her beauty and spirit, and what fortune she might inherit ? She was overweighted, and unfortunately she was not fit to measure the clogs calculated to drag anyone down. It was a pity that she could not yield without a struggle. Sir William was a bit of a Turk, although all Lady Thwaite had said of him was true. It was to be hoped that he would not develop into a Bluebeard. If Iris could have seen it to be her wisest course, it might have saved useless contention and suffering ; but Lady Thwaite had done her best, her ladyship wound up with a shrug of her shoulders.

So courageously did Iris carry herself to hide her wound and hinder herself from becoming a drag on the satisfaction of her neighbours, that only one person remarked the girl who had left the ball-room the happiest creature there, and who returned to it dizzy from a blow, with her maidenly pride up in arms and humiliated, and her heart fluttering with nameless shame, pain, and terror. It was not her old friend, Lucy, who saw the change. It was the awkwardly stiff young man, clumsily encumbered with his lessons in polite accomplishments, wretchedly self-conscious, out of his element, and so racked with anxiety and shaken with alternate ague-fits of heat and cold, hope and fear, that he could not offer the slightest response to the many overtures—some of them not ungenerous or self-seeking—made to him as he hung about the doors and corners of the room. The consequence was that he was pronounced the merest stick, the most unsocial fellow in the world. It was he who was quick to observe the subtle alteration in Iris Compton's look, though her gait was as elastic, and the rosy flush on her delicately-rounded cheek a more perfect carmine than ever.

‘They have allowed her to do herself up,’ he complained to himself angrily. ‘She is as sick as I am of all this falalling rigmarole.’

There was a little agreeable murmur rather than hush of expectation. Ladies sat and fanned themselves, and complained of the July heat, but could not make up their minds to go out on the terrace—not just at this moment. They hoped there would be no thunderstorm before to-morrow, both for Sir William’s hay and their presence at the hay-making. It was so seldom that there was any summer gaiety in Eastham, except tennis-parties, of which everybody was sick, or harvest festivals and thanksgiving services, which might be pretty and improving, but were not very entertaining. Gentlemen formed a succession of little circles, copying the circle of officers who wore the badge of the stewards of the concluding ceremonies.

A flutter among those who were not acquainted with the cotillon heralded the entrance of servants with a great basketful of bouquets, composed of distinctive individual flowers, of white stephanotis, roses of every hue, striped carnations, purple petunias, blue or scarlet salvias, yellow and brown calceo-

larias, each tied with its appropriate white, red, or blue riband. These bouquets were handed to all the young people, ladies and gentlemen alike. Then the masters of the ceremonies announced to the novices, who were fingering the flowers and gazing doubtfully at the ribands—not knowing what to make of the posies and their streamers, since the most of the recipients were provided with bouquets already—that these cotillon bouquets matched each other two and two, and were to serve as indexes in the choice of partners, besides being worn without fail by their owners in the waltz which was to follow.

Then commenced a grand hunt for corresponding nosegays, with plenty of jesting and laughter. Short-sighted men peered about for special roses with their special ribands. Colour and form blind men obstinately persisted that oleander blossom was the flower of a balsam, or that the large clustered head of the plumbago, with its grey-blue, was one and the same with the little sky-blue tufts of lobelia.

Nanny Hollis tied her nosegay of marigolds under one ear in a trice. She was a tall girl, but she stood up in order that yellow and

brown might the more easily detect her. Maudie swung her Tom Thumb geraniums from her girdle like a châtelaine, and advised her partner to tie his flowers at his knee as a new Order of the Garter.

But Iris Compton kept her stephanotis and its bridal-white riband hidden out of sight, while she glanced round in fright. Some witch at Sir William Thwaite's elbow—it might have been Lady Thwaite—in spite of everything had guided his selection, for he was dangling a handful of stephanotis, and looking about with eager trepidation.

Iris leant back and stooped down to one of Lady Thwaite's young cousins. She was a little girl of fifteen, full of the enthusiastic admiration which some girls lavish on other girls older than themselves. Iris Compton was at present the object of Janie Fuller's devotion.

'Do you like the scent of stephanotis, Janie?' inquired Iris faintly; 'I don't; it makes me sick.' And she had grown as pale as a lily within the last few minutes.

'Oh, then don't keep it near you, dear Miss Compton,' pleaded Janie, intent on serving the heroine she was worshipping. 'Give it to

me, I am very fond of the scent, and though I were not, it would not matter. Change with me; my flower is only heather, with a tartan riband; that won't hurt you. But will it spoil the dance if we change the flowers? Will auntie or Lady Fermor be displeased? Oh, please tell me, Miss Compton,' besought Janie, in an agony of divided feelings. There was her delight in doing something for her goddess. There was her dread of not behaving properly so as to annoy her aunt, who had procured for her, Janie, one of the greatest treats of her young life. Above all, there was the terror of drawing down upon herself the wrath of that awful old Lady Fermor.

'No, no, there will still be partners for everybody, and I will take the responsibility. You know it is my ball, Janie,' said Iris, hurriedly asserting her privilege with a poor attempt at a smile. At the same time she was ostentatiously shaking out her borrowed heather and tartan. They were successful in bringing to her side a stripling brother of Janie's, who would certainly have been a fitter partner for his sister than for the young mistress and beauty of the ball. The last distinction had been universally admitted, more

to the satisfaction of Lucy Acton than of Sir William Thwaite. He might have cared for other people's homage to Iris if he had not been mortally jealous of every man who approached her.

As for the very young gentleman who led Iris forth to the waltz, he was at the *nil admirari* stage of his existence. He would not have given a cricket-match for all the balls in the world. He had already enraged Janie by declaring that he could not see what she made such a row about in Miss Compton, a maypole of a girl with a little round turnip of a head, pink-painted cheeks, and the recollection of carrots in her hair. He would have preferred pulling about and teasing his sister by a long chalk to being compelled to stick that beastly rubbish of heather in the pocket of his jacket, and to 'tread a measure,' like any other theatrical ass, with the young lady of the house. The gentleman was not even propitiated by the circumstance that Iris, in her excitement and in the reaction produced by her small achievement, chatted to him as if she had been a very chatterbox.

Sir William fell to the share of the quaking Janie. He was hugely disappointed, and

showed it transparently ; but he had escaped seeing the manœuvre which gave him his partner, and fancied it was only a stroke of his bad luck, though he was considered by the assembly generally the luckiest fellow going.

If any other person received a surprise at the result of the pairing of flowers and couples in one case, he or she was fain to conclude that a servant had blundered or had been unable to carry out private instructions.

The cotillon lottery had been quite fair, several people remarked with approbation, when they saw Miss Compton dancing with a school-boy, and Sir William Thwaite, in his absence of mind, lifting Janie clean off her feet.

When the waltz was over there was another distribution of indexes and adornments. At the first glimpse, the young people were inclined to cry that the substitutes for the flowers were too childish and absurd. Then the company found that to every paper helmet or ass's head which was extracted from one of the crackers—that are generally reserved for the amusement of very juvenile parties on Christmas Eve and Twelfth Night—Lady Fermor had been so liberal as to add, by way

of bribe, a pretty, more or less valuable trinket or fantastic charm, which could be worn either at a lady's or a gentleman's watch-chain.

A hum of gratification on the discovery testified that a large proportion of the bigger boys and girls there were willing to make fools of themselves for a small reward.

If her fate and her human foes were alike minded to betray Iris on this occasion, she must submit so far to destiny. She must dance her round with Sir William, as the old desperate villain danced his round beneath the gallows-tree, though every eye in the room should be upon her and her partner, and every soul present mistake the couple's relations and injure and insult Iris by the mistake. Iris could not affect to be overcome by a paper crown, mitre, apron, or tippet, and she could not openly insult Sir William in her grandmother's house by a marked rejection of his claim, and breach of the laws of the dance. She was too gentle, too courteous, her good-breeding went too far beyond skin-depth, to permit her thus to release herself, at the expense of Sir William and the company. The favour or treachery, call it which you will, appeared again in the distribution of the

crackers, else Sir William was indeed the luckiest of men in externals and empty conquests. Fortune, half unbandaged, had awarded him a green paper sash with an emerald buckle to fasten it, and a fac-simile of the same sash and buckle lay in Iris's lap. His keen eyes detected the coincidence immediately. He came up and looked at her appealingly, with the blue eyes which she had said melted like a woman's sometimes.

'I suppose we must seem as great babies as the others,' she said, with a rush of colour to the cheeks which had been pale just before. She spoke in a formal, constrained way—the first time she had shown such a manner to him. He started, and looked at her with a more desperate appeal than ever.

'“Green is sorrow unseen,” I should warn you,' she said, lingering, as if she hoped to find him superstitious, and to play on his superstition.

'I don't mind,' he answered in a voice half-choked with the tumult of his feelings. 'I don't mind anything.'

She rose and stopped him from saying more. She ought to have fastened his scarf on his shoulder, but she left that duty to a servant

while she clasped her paper rag beneath one arm.

The scene had changed to a harlequinade, in which Iris's one ray of comfort was that the two must pass comparatively unnoticed among much more ridiculous figures causing merriment verging on boisterousness. For had not tall Nanny Hollis fluttering wings pinned to her shoulders, and was she not dancing with the smallest mite of a man in the room, having companion wings tacked to his little shoulders, which, as they waved in time to the music, gave him the air of making a perpetual vain effort to fly up to a level with his partner? Was not Ludovic Acton waltzing, and pointing the beak of a vulture over the shoulder of a vulture maiden from no greater distance than Knotley?

No wonder Mrs. Mildmay took to reproaching her husband as if this were more than she had bargained for, more than any exemplary matron could come through and live or else be for ever compromised.

'Is it a masquerade ball, Tom? Oh, I thought masquerade balls were confined to the opera-houses, and only attended by actors and actresses.'

‘My dear Amelia, you ought to go more into society—indeed you ought,’ protested the aggrieved husband. ‘This is only one of the figures of the cotillon. You will take fright at calico balls next : you will say calico balls are only got up for music-halls and casinos.’

Iris would have hoped that she and her partner passed unobserved among the greater notorieties, if Sir William had not waltzed a little wildly, as if he had lost his head, so that he did not stop with the others, or hear her telling him she would not have another turn. And when he paused at last, it was before Lady Fermor, who—Herculean old woman as she had shown herself—was in the act of withdrawing to rest for half an hour before supper.

Iris tried to meet her grandmother’s gaze without betraying consciousness or tremor ; but the girl’s modest hazel eyes fell abashed before the bold, half-taunting challenge which met hers. ‘What characters are you two young people representing?’ cried the old lady in great good-humour. ‘A pair of Tyrolean beggars on the tramp with an organ-grinder? A couple of Foresters from the worshipful company that hold their annual festival at the

Crystal Palace? only the wives and sweethearts do not go in character; they are supposed to be too retiring for fancy dresses. Well, I am pleased to see that you are enjoying yourselves, and I'm ready to say "God bless you, my children," whenever you like.'

Iris drew her arm from Sir William's, and moved hastily away. He might take the words as a matter of course. He might not understand them in their stagey slang. This was a forlorn hope. But if he were sharper, what a cruelly mortifying ordeal for her to be thus thrown at any man's head! At the head of this man, who could hardly be expected to see that she had no share in the unwomanly transaction. It was not to be thought that he would disclaim it for her, or even feel for her in this humiliating position. He had emerged within the last six months from a condition lower than that of any of the servants at Lambford. She had never refused to admit that there were nature's noblemen, but these she understood to be martyrs, heroes, geniuses at the very least, not mere stiff, shy, young squires and baronets. She had been surprised to find Sir William could conduct himself passably, but he had been led into an intoler-

able blunder which a better-bred man might have avoided. He had been betrayed by the coarseness of perception and vain credulity which had made him become an easy prey to her grandmother's scheme. At this very moment Sir William might be exulting in what his lands and title could do. He might be making up his mind to get rid of all the matters on which the couple differed—of what would appear to him her squeamishness and fads from the time that he consented to take a willing bride.

Iris was mistress of the situation in the two concluding acts of the cotillon. These were the prettiest, most dramatic, and most foreign of the whole.

A chair was placed in the middle of the room, and Iris was the first called to fill it. A hand-mirror was given to her; a march was played by the band; all the young men in the room passed in single file at the back of her chair, each pausing an instant that his image might be reflected in the glass she held. If she accepted the first man for her partner, she must let his image remain till he, recognising the sign, came round to the front of the chair from which she had risen, led her out of the

circle, when the two ought to waltze a single round of the room. Then another girl seated herself in the chair, and the same performance was repeated. If Cassiopea rejected the first man, she passed her handkerchief across the mirror, as if she were brushing away the offending image, and she might go on effacing quenched partners, one after another, to the last man, and, blotting him out also, decline to dance at all.

It was a tableau rather than a dance, a capital tableau for a born actress or a finished coquette, who could improve upon the original idea by fine touches of coyness, disdain, hesitation, surrender, to the delight of the audience.

Iris was no coquette, and she had only one thought in her mind, that of publicly refusing to have anything more to do with Sir William Thwaite, by theoretically wiping out his image. Her nimble mind had quickly laid hold of one important deduction. If she accepted the first, second, or third man for her partner, of course taking it for granted that none of the gentlemen was Sir William, her decision would be to a great extent without point. It might look the simple effect of girlish shy-

ness and unwillingness to offend. It would be treating the unpalatable suitor thrust upon her, exactly as she treated a large proportion of the other young men. She must behave as if she were deliberately waiting till the partner of her choice presented himself; she must sit till the reflection of Sir William was in the mirror, and she had the chance of seeming to wipe it out. Oh, surely then he would take the hint! and it would dawn upon him that she had never looked upon him in any other light than that of an acquaintance and neighbour, who might be the better for a kind word or look. He would comprehend that she had pitied, even liked him, but never cared for him as her grandmother had arranged that they should care for each other. In her case the two feelings of pity and love, in place of being akin, were as far apart as the poles. He must believe her that she would not willingly have trifled with him, that she had continued in utter ignorance of what had been thought and said by others up to this very evening, when, for his sake as well as her own, she was forced to make her meaning very plain.

Iris sat the picture of youthful loveliness,

with an erect, undaunted carriage which she had shown before on special occasions, but only then. The company, thinking of her youth, and having some idea of her relations with her grandmother, marvelled that she acted her part so well. 'She will make a dignified mistress of Whitehills. What a boon to that cub Sir William! The man may creep altogether into his shell, and remain there for the rest of his days, with so efficient a partner. She will not let herself be put upon. She will know what to do for both—a child like that! How cool and composed! She is no school-girl blushing and giggling, and looking fatuously round for guidance and support. She might have been a trained actress, or the heiress to a great estate. It is wonderful!'

The gallants of Eastham behaved with the gentlemanlike *gaucherie*, the paralysis of intelligence and morbid *mauvaise honte*, which is apt to attack the young gentlemen of England when they are unexpectedly called upon for an exhibition of histrionic talent. They tumbled and stumbled, sidled and boggled past Iris, who sat so still and so steadily, with her heart throbbing as if it would burst her

bosom, or make its beating heard above the rhythm of the march, as, with a movement that grew measured and mechanical, she passed her handkerchief lightly across the glass, and hid the reflection of one smiling, reddening face after another.

Still he did not come. What if in his laggardness, or in his conceit and vulgar desire to flaunt his triumph, he stayed to the last? Then Iris's fastidiousness and determination, in place of giving a conspicuous denial to his claims, would lend a glaring confirmation to the report and to his hopes. Because, as the daughter of the house and leader of this figure of the cotillon, she could not well avail herself of the welcome privilege of not dancing at all. She began to get dizzy with apprehension, to be conscious of a panic laying hold of her. She would wait no longer. She would leave the next reflection unbroken in the mirror. But happily agitation did not dim her eyes, for what she saw was the representation of the upright figure and soldierly step tramping past—contrasting not unfavourably with the irregular, shuffling paces that had gone before—the head slightly bent, the flushed face glooming with a very passion of

suspense. It was the image she had been looking for and dreading to see.

Iris's arm was not unnerved by the apparition. With a rapid gesture she swept her handkerchief, as if in the impatience of high disdain, right across the glass.

Iris was conscious of a little stir of surprise in those around, and then she felt she could go no farther with the play. Instead of looking at Sir William's successor in the nearly completed file of rejected candidates, she shut her eyes for a second and let her arm drop, so that her handkerchief fell to the ground. The next moment she beheld Major Pollock leering and sneering and bowing before her. She had done well ; she had given point to her suggestion with a vengeance. She had as much as said that a broken-down reprobate who belonged to her set, the person she detested most among her acquaintances, was preferable in her eyes to the Squire of Whitehills.

The consideration was a small consolation to Iris, when she was whirled away by the *ci-devant* man about town, with his step made up, like everything else about him—to suit his gout in this instance—his hateful, out-

of-date swaggering coxcombry. ‘ ‘Pon my word, I don’t know what to say, Miss Compton, for this mark of your favour! I’m a modest man, so that I’m at a loss to know what I’ve done to deserve it, unless you and I are going to be better friends in future. You may depend upon it I’m eternally obliged to you.’

Swearing friendship with Major Pollock—was that what Iris had come to? It was a greater consolation that she was soon done with him. So much time was spent in each girl’s making her choice of a partner, that the chosen man had to be content with the honour of his election, and eschew the profit of more than one round of the room.

Iris did not venture to seek out Sir William with her eyes, and learn, by the evidence of her senses, whether he was rampaging in a rude fury, or merely moderately morose. She was fain to trust that he had got enough of the cotillon, and would keep himself out of the last figure, which was only another version of what had gone before. The reversal of that rule of society by which a gentleman is supposed either to select or to be given to his partner, in all the various forms in which

people dispose of themselves or disport themselves in the upper circles, must have fascinated the imagination of that master of the ceremonies—or more probably that queen of fashion—to whom the cotillon is due. The last figure was a repetition, with a slight variety, of the magnanimous permission for a fanciful girl rather than strong-minded woman to select her champion, while it also betokened that the invention of the author was beginning to fail.

All the girls in the ball-room stood together in the centre of the room, making a stationary blooming ring, with their faces turned to an outer ring of young men that moved round the inner ring. As inclination prompted her, a girl bowed and made a step forward to a privileged man of her acquaintance, who took her hand and led her to his side. If Iris had been stern in stamping out a false impression—a base insinuation—that she had stooped and sold herself to the master of Whitehills, Sir William Thwaite proved stubborn in insisting on a public demonstration which should dispel the dream of his life, and scatter his hopes to the winds. He was in the revolving ring of men, but Iris did not wait for him to

approach her. She eagerly nodded and advanced to Ludovic Acton, when he drew near, and went aside with him. She did not want to hurt Sir William more than she could help. She was utterly incapable of wanton cruelty. The blow she had dealt had rebounded on her own head, the sword-thrust was quivering in her own heart. She was very glad when Lucy Acton graced Sir William with her hand before the whole of the young people were whirling round in a final waltz.

Supper followed immediately afterwards. Iris might have saved herself from a last spasm of fright, for Lady Fermor, who had returned to the ball-room, took Sir William's arm as the crowning mark of what she had intended to have been the significant distinction conferred on him throughout the evening, and Iris fell thankfully to her last partner. But King Lud did not monopolize the attention of his companion. She could not keep it from straying to Lady Fermor and Sir William; she could not shake off the suspicion that they were speaking of her, plotting against her, if it ought to be called a plot, when he might merely be complaining of her avoidance of him, and Lady Fermor smooth-

ing him down and reassuring him. His face—primitively transparent in spite of its fair share of sense and intelligence—certainly looked so black that she feared other people must remark it, while Lady Fermor had her rallying, snap-your-fingers, authoritative expression in full force.

Iris's guess was not wide of the mark. Sir William had said, in his gruff, hurt undertones, 'I tell you it is of no earthly use. I had better let it alone before worse comes of it. I have your goodwill, I know, but that ain't everything.'

'Now, Thwaite, what in creation are you down in the mouth about? You were all right when I left the room. Do you expect a girl like her to jump down your throat? Did you ever hear of such a quality as coyness? Are you not aware it is the most favourable, flattering symptom women betray at an early stage of a certain malady? Were you never told that when a woman is willing, a man can but look like a fool? Do you want to look like a fool? Would you deprive us of our single, short season of power? Don't we pay dearly for it to the best of you men in the long-run? See what your *fête champêtre*

to-morrow will do. Take my word for it that it will turn the scales, if there is any turning needed. She is just the style of girl, at the age to be idiotic about green fields, and rubbish of weeds, beetles, and snails, and all the rest of it. You can show her your house, too; and though it is not like Lambford, to be plain with you—you observe I don't butter you up—it is a fine place of its kind. You have my consent to press your suit. I will see that you are not worsted in the end, but you cannot expect that you are to walk over the field and conquer without a siege or a battle, or the shabbiest skirmish. What cheek you must have! The prize would not be worth the winning if you got it at so easy a rate.'

Lucy followed Iris to her room that night. 'Oh dear, it has been such a charming ball—everybody says so!' exclaimed Lucy, in a glow. 'I never enjoyed anything half so much in my life. I feel perfectly demoralized; and, do you know, that dear fellow, Sir William, has promised such a handsome subscription for the harvest feast! He hardly waited for me to speak of it. Of course I should not have thought of asking him to put

down his name the first time I had spoken to him. But when he saw I was pleased with his volunteering a subscription, in the handsomest, most modest manner, I assure you, darling, he wished to double it. I had actually to forbid it. There is a man with his heart in the right place ! That is of twice as much consequence as his having stamped and dug his fists into his eyes, after the fashion of Gerald and Charlie over their Latin Grammar, or pulled an oar, or ridden a hurdle-race at Oxford or Cambridge. I was quite struck with his appearance to-night. He is a fine, soldierly-looking man when one comes to study him closely. I don't in the least wonder that you, who value all that is honest and kind, like him so much, though you tease him a little.'

It became clear enough to Iris, in her heart-sickness, that Lucy's ears had been open, and had picked up a good deal more than the amount of Sir William's subscription. A horrible suspicion arose that Lucy might have such a mania for charities, she could be brought to stretch a point in the bestowal of a bosom-friend for their advantage.

'I am glad you have been happy, Lucy,' said Iris wearily.

‘ Oh, happy ! I am only afraid it is wrong to be so happy in a scene of mere worldly gaiety—though the Church does not condemn innocent gaiety, does it, dear ? Then there is to-morrow to look forward to. I shall so enjoy seeing Whitehills again in a new light. But I shall leave you now, Iris, for you do look tired, and no wonder ; but you must be at your brightest to-morrow.’

Iris was at last at liberty to pace up and down her room, toss on her sleepless pillow, and cry, ‘ Oh ! I am glad it was not my real birthday,’ with the restless, tumultuous, half-fanciful trouble of youth.

END OF VOL. I.





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